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India Number

Mulk Raj Anand

Buddhadeva Bose

Tarashankar Banerji

Agyeya

Chittaprosad

Dhumketu



समवेब जयते

The

Literary

Review

Upendra Nath Ashk

Ismat Chughtai

Humayun Kabir

Dharmavir Bharati

Sudhindranath Datta

Krishan Chander

Jibanananda Das

C. Rajagopalachari

Bishnu Dey

QUARTERLY / ONE DOLLAR / SUMMER 1961

## Editorial Notes

We suspect that the sampling of recent Indian writing and art that follows will soften for most American readers the stern judgment of Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, our Guest Editor, in his introductory essay, that "only few works of imagination or outstanding ability have come to light during the decade of freedom." For ourselves, we have been impressed by India's contemporary contributions to world writing, including the contributions of Dr. Anand himself as novelist, critic and editor. And we think that the stories, poems and art that he, with the assistance of others, has garnered for this India number of *The Literary Review* speak their own virtues in a moving way.

While in India in 1949 and again in 1952, Dr. Decker discussed with various Indian cultural and political leaders the possibility of furthering India-United States understanding through the dissemination in this country of the best contemporary writing of India and vice versa. He proposed specifically the publication of an anthology either in book form or in an existing magazine. The suggestion met with warm response, but the opportunity to implement it did not come until the summer of 1957 when the proposal was renewed with His Excellency Arthur S. Lall, then his government's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Ambassador Lall's personal enthusiasm and other good offices prepared and speeded the way.

Since then, several imposing anthologies of contemporary Indian writing have appeared in the United States, among them the India number of the *Atlantic* (February 1958), *Poetry* magazine (January 1959), and the volume, *Green and Gold*

(New Directions 1958), edited by Dr. Humayan Kabir. Now we are happy to join the band wagon of what we hope will become a continuing parade of Indian writing in the United States.

In addition to Ambassador Lall and Dr. Anand, for whose generous labors of love we are all grateful, the Editors of *The Literary Review* are indebted to many others for good counsel and practical assistance: particularly to Bonnie Crown, Publications Director of The Asia Society, who made available the stories by Ashk Bose, Chander and Singh; and to Buddhadeva Bose, the distinguished author and Professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, who this last spring was Visiting Professor at New York University. Finally, and principally, we are grateful to the writers themselves and to their translators and to the artists whose work appears in these pages.

This India number is the fifth in the series devoted wholly to the contemporary writing of a single country other than the United States. The earlier numbers concerned Israel (Spring 1958), India (Autumn 1959), Philippines (Summer 1960), and Turkey (Winter 1960-61). Similar numbers for future publication are in progress. We are delighted with the generous reception each has received—generous, indeed, that all are now "collectors items." The United States Information Agency has thought them sufficiently useful in international cultural exchange to distribute copies in substantial numbers among its centers abroad. And several of the governments of the countries concerned have similarly arranged for serviceable distribution. But it should be

(continue inside back cover)

## Contributors

AGHEYA is the pen name of S. Vatsyayan, Hindi poet and novelist and editor of the magazine *Vak*.

MULK RAJ ANAND (1905- ) is the internationally known Indian novelist. His work is marked by humanist tendencies and a radical outlook. He is the editor of India's premier art magazine, *Marg*, and a member of the National Academy of Letters.

UPENDRA NATH ASHK, Allahabad, India, published his first story in 1926 and has been writing continuously over the years: novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and essays.

TARASHANKAR BANERJI (1898- ), a leading Bengali novelist, writes mainly about village life.

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BUDDHADEVA BOSE (1908- )—leading Bengali author of more than a hundred titles, including poetry, fiction, criticism, *belles-lettres*, and children's books—founded and edits *Kavita*, Bengali poetry magazine now in its twenty-sixth year of publication.

KRISHAN CHANDER has published short stories in several magazines.

CHITTAPROSAD is a well-known Bombay artist.

ISMAT CHUGTAI, leading Urdu fiction writer, is well-known for her beautiful prose.

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"Grass" first appeared in *Kavita* (1960).

JYOTIRMOY DATTA (1936- ), journalist by profession, has published verse and criticism in *Kavita* and is currently working on a novel.

SUDHINDRANATH DATTA (1901-1960), the chief theoretician of modernism in Bengal and the center of a distinguished coterie, was a critic of fine perception and a poet and translator. "1945" first appeared in *Kavita* (1960).

BISHNU DEY (1909- ), both a modernist and a traditional poet, has translated Eliot, Pound, Eluard and other Western poets.

DHUMKETU (1892- ) is a leading Gujarati novelist.

KARTAR SINGH DUGGAL (1917- ), distinguished short story writer in Punjabi, works with All India Radio.

V. S. GAITONDE, Bombay, is deeply interested in the world art movement and greatly respects the work of Paul Klee, Roualt and Picasso.

MAQBUL FIDA HUSAIN, acclaimed by many as a leader of the modern art movement in India, has exhibited in Asia, Europe, and the United States.

HUMAYUN KABIR (1906- ), prominent Bengali poet, essayist and philosopher, is Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs and the editor of *Green and Gold*, an anthology of Bengali writing in English translation (New Directions).

B. S. MARDHEKAR ( ? -1956), poet and essayist, wrote in English and Marathi.

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PREMENDRA MITRA (1904- ) is a leading Bengali poet, short story writer and essayist.

AKHTAR MOHI-UD-DIN (1928- ) is one of the youngest Kashmiri fiction writers.

K. M. PANNIKAR—poet, historian, scholar, diplomat—is a member of the Indian Parliament.

SUMITRANANDAN PANT is a leading Hindi poet of the romantic-mystic school.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI (1879- ) an elder statesman, is the foremost writer in Tamil.

JAI RATAN translated *The Angry Goddess and Other Stories*, recently published by the Calcutta Writers Workshop.

LILA RAY, American by birth, has written several books on Bengali literature, a book of essays and many poems. She translated an anthology of Bengali short stories, *Broken Bread* into English.

RALPH RUSSELL, lecturer in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, has translated a selection of modern Urdu short stories, including the one in the number of *The Literary Review*.

KHUSHWANT SINGH (1917- ) a lawyer by profession, has published three studies on Sikh culture; two short story collections; and two novels, *Mano Majra* and *I Shall Not Hear of Nightingale*, both also published in the United States (Grove).



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LABOURERS, woodcut by Chittappa

# New Bearings in Indian Literature

MULK RAJ ANAND

THE QUESTION has been asked during the last two years: Has there been an upsurge in our literature since the transfer of power from British to Indian hands? If one can dare to be honest in this matter, without causing offense all around, one would have to confess that, judged by the highest standards of literature, only few works of imagination or outstanding ability have come to light during the decade of freedom.

It is likely that some people may ask what are the highest standards of literature, and how to judge contributions from the fourteen or more languages of India without acquaintance with all these languages? The only plausible definition one can give of the term "highest standards" is: the extent to which a literary work moves, by its inner momentum, its truth and its skill, whole peoples, stirring their emotions and changing them, if ever so little, from the routine acceptance of existence to a criticism of life and the consequent spiritual quest often called "divine discontent." And such works as approximate to truth and reality do not remain confined to the language in which they are written, but compel attention from other languages and become almost universal books.

Now there have been books produced in our country during the past ages which are world books in this sense. And even during the modern period there have been works written—like some of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore and one or two of his novels, a few of Sarat Chandra Chatterji's pieces of long and short fiction, and some stories of Munshi Premchand—which have achieved recognition or are bound to find wide audiences when the opportunity for publishing these books both in the languages of India and the different languages of the world open out to Indian writing. One cannot say that the contemporaries in this sense have compelled attention among their immediate neighbors or outside India with the same artistic force and vivacity which the older writers brought to some

of their creative work.

This is not to deny the important contribution of some of the significant contemporary writers. Bibhuti Bannerji's *Pather Panchali*, in spite of its small canvass, compares favorably with some parts of Sarat Chatterji's *Srikant*. Manik Bannerji's *Boatmen of the Padma* is an elemental book which will outlast this generation. And Tarashankar Bannerji's *Kavi* will force a way into the sister languages without any effort on the part of its author. So will the few short stories of the Urdu writer, Ismat Chughtai, especially "Boorhi Kaki." Perhaps some of the Hindi poems of Sumitranandan Pant, Mahadevi Verna and the Allahabad Group of young poets will be increasingly read in the next ten years. And the intense poetry of the Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, will become part of the world anthologies. The later poems of Mahakavi Vallathol may turn out to be as poignant as the poems of the last phase of Tagore. And the vibrating Malayalam prose of K. M. Pannikar will certainly come to be known as soon as prejudices against the South Indian languages disappear. And who knows but that one great talent working in an obscure corner of India may not shoot out like a star across the literary horizon as did Renu, the Hindi writer from Bihar, the author of *Maila Anchal*?

All the same, I would be inclined to say that few books of creative fiction and poetry speak for our generation in India as did Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* for Italy, Halldor Laxness's *Independent People* for Iceland, the *Four Quartets* of T. S. Eliot for the Anglo-Saxon world, and Albert Camus' *La Peste* for France.

As far as one can see, there are quite a few reasons for this lack of significant achievement.

In the first place, the inhibitions imposed by British rule on the language led to the prevalence of an acute sense of inferiority among the writers in most languages except Bengali, Urdu and Hindi, which had been foremost in the struggles of the Orientalists against the Anglophiles in Calcutta after Lord Macaulay's Memorandum had led to the introduction of English as the medium of education.

The English language encouraged in the universities was rather in the nature of "King Emperor's English" (taught by third-rate

teachers to potential clerks) rather than "King's English," which contains the riches of English literature. The fact that British bureaucracy was composed of men who were not often distinguished for their taste in literature and knew little of the important currents of thought meant that the classics of the West did not percolate into India until some members of the Indian intelligentsia, particularly from Bengal, broke away from the Indian university system and drank at the sources of European culture on their own initiative.

Secondly, after the harmful effects of the social chaos produced by British rule had made themselves felt for several generations, the writers in the languages of India have had little time to acquire the confidence necessary to stand on their own and create an intense modern literature out of the raw material of inadequate vocabularies.

The words of most of our languages are probably well suited to lyrical and emotional utterance in poetry, but they lack a phraseology sufficient for the expression of modern thought-content, which is so important to writing an adequate prose; besides, the slow process of our predominantly rural life has tended to exalt onomatopoeic words of high sounding phrases, in long sentences, as against the sharp, staccato utterance of contemporary industrial man. In the technically backward areas, the architectonic prose of Thomas Hardy or the jumble of John Galsworthy, with pages of ballast describing landscape, are still preferred to the resilient style of the automatic writers, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, William Faulkner, or Hemingway.

Thirdly, the social anarchy of the period of alien rule, already referred to, had disrupted the old values of Indian life, such as caste, family, indigenous religions, and our way of life, without ushering in any but the superficial impulses of modernity. The one anna newspapers, the sola topee, coat-patloon, revolvers, bicycles, railways, restaurants and cinema became the new gods of an ill-educated intelligentsia, while the illumination of the European Renaissance was prevented from entering the country by the Sea Custom's Act and other forms of political censorship. The result has been that while what was important among the values of old Indian life went by the board through the coming of machine forms, the genuine intellectual values of western civilization could not be acquired or

assimilated by the intelligentsia, thus producing a hotchpotch world in which no sense of direction could be seen.

Fourthly, in this confused atmosphere, especially through the second World War and after, there came large waves of commercialism, particularly from America, which put a premium on the Hollywood kind of film, the thriller, the horror story, and the kind of romance where boy meets girl, boy does not get girl for a while, but boy ultimately gets girl, to live happily ever after. Bereft of the more serious literature through poverty, the average reader could buy only the glossy pocket books, dumped into India at low cost, and his taste was certainly not improved by the influence of these cheap books. And quite a few writers in the languages, often very poor and unable to make a living by the pen, soon became hacks for the more aggressive publisher, who wished to cater to the public in the same way in which the American best-selling publisher gets at his victims. This has led to the depreciation of the values of literature more insidiously than any other pernicious influence. The movement of the intelligentsia to the cities had led to the rise in the income from book writing of the more honest variety. And thus a good many writers began to write indifferent dialogue for bad films, and were rendered incapable of writing anything genuine afterwards.

Under these conditions, the most important part of the patronage to literary men had come in one form or another from the new national government at the center and in the states. This help was necessary in a country where the cultural process had been held in check by the contempt of the alien rulers for native culture and by the exigencies of a prolonged and continuous political struggle of the people themselves. The formation of the Sahitya Akademi and the National Academy of Letters had given dignity and importance to all the languages of the country, and the classics of the world have begun to be translated into our languages through the intervention of the Academe. This initiative is likely to have the most healthy results for our literatures.

But the form of state patronage which the contemporary writers found most lucrative was textbook writing and other publicity work at very low pressure for the state governments. As the leadership in the states had tended to be steeped in ignorance and orthodox



besides being conservative and obtuse, the literary man has often had to sacrifice the truth of his sensibility in satisfying the demands of the new kind of ruler who is frightened by the free word and freer thought. Thus literature, which is the criticism of life and the harbinger of change in the values of society, because it asks questions and explodes the accepted conventions of static societies, had little chance of breaking through the new orthodoxy which lurks behind patrons.

"The Devil is after us," Jawaharlal Nehru said recently. And all we now can hope for is that the dead in life will heed this warning.

All vital literatures create their own legends, their own styles, and no force in the world, political or other, can shape their currents except man's sensibility in an almost magical communion with the inner pulse of the age. Thus there is no formula for good writing, apart from individual talent of the highest order. And no good book full of the instinct of life produced by such an individual can ever die, even if it be by the obscurest scribe, as no bad book can be made into a classic by the prejudices of the literary critics.

"I am the Word which did play and dance all things," runs a hymn of Jesus. And everyone knows the suffering and the search from which the gnostic text arose! Some people also know that Christ was put on the Cross before His truth could prevail. . . .



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# The Letter

DHUMKETU

Translated from the Gujarati by the author

IN THE GREY SKY of early dawn stars still glowed, as happy memories light up a life that is nearing its close. An old man was walking through the town, now and again drawing his tattered cloak tighter to shield his body from the cold and biting wind. From some houses standing apart came the sound of grinding mills and the sweet voices of women singing at their work, and these sounds helped him along his lonely way. Except for the occasional bark of a dog, the distant steps of a workman going early to work or the screech of a bird disturbed before its time, the whole town was wrapped in deathly silence. Most of its inhabitants were still in the arms of sleep, a sleep which grew more and more profound on account of the intense winter cold; for the cold used sleep to extend its sway over all things even as a false friend lulls his chosen victim with caressing smiles. The old man, shivering at times but fixed of purpose, plodded on till he came out of the town gate on to a straight road. Along this he now went at a somewhat slower pace, supporting himself on his old staff.

On one side of the road was a row of trees, on the other the town's public garden. The night was darker now and the cold more intense, for the wind was blowing straight along the road and on it there only fell, like frozen snow, the faint light of the morning star. At the end of the garden stood a handsome building of the newest style, and light gleamed through the crevices of its closed doors and windows.

Beholding the wooden arch of this building, the old man was filled with the joy that the pilgrim feels when he first sees the goal of his journey. On the arch hung an old board with the newly painted letters: POST OFFICE. The old man went in quietly and squatted on the veranda. The voices of the two or three people busy at their

routine work could be heard faintly through the wall.

"Police Superintendent," a voice inside called sharply. The old man started at the sound, but composed himself again to wait. But for the faith and love that warmed him he could not have borne the bitter cold.

Name after name rang out from within as the clerk read out the English addresses on the letters and flung them to the waiting postmen. From long practice he had acquired great speed in reading out the titles—Commissioner, Superintendent, Diwan Sahib, Librarian—and in flinging out the letters.

In the midst of this procedure a jesting voice from inside called, "Coachman Ali!"

The old man got up, raised his eyes to Heaven in gratitude and, stepping forward, put his hand on the door.

"Godul Bhai!"

"Yes. Who's there?"

"You called out Coachman Ali's name, didn't you? Here I am. I have come for my letter."

"It is a mad man, sir, who worries us by calling every day for letters that never come," said the clerk to the postmaster.

The old man went back slowly to the bench on which he had been accustomed to sit for five long years.

Ali had once been a clever shikari. As his skill increased so did his love for the hunt, till at last it was as impossible for him to pass a day without it as it is for the opium eater to forego his daily portion. When Ali sighted the earth-brown partridge, almost invisible to other eyes, the poor bird, they said, was as good as in his bag. His sharp eyes would see the hare crouching in its form. When even the dogs failed to see the creature cunningly hidden in the yellow-brown scrub, Ali's eagle eyes would catch sight of its ears; and in another moment it was dead. Besides this, he would often go with his friends, the fishermen.

But when the evening of his life was drawing in, he left his old ways and suddenly took a new turn. His only child, Miriam, married and left him. She went off with a soldier to his regiment in the Punjab, and for the last five years he had had no news of this daughter for whose sake alone he dragged on a cheerless existence.

Now he understood the meaning of love and separation. He could no longer enjoy the sportsman's pleasure and laugh at the bewildered terror of the young partridges bereft of their parents.

Although the hunter's instinct was in his very blood and bones, such a loneliness had come into his life since the day Miriam had gone away that now, forgetting his sport, he would become lost in admiration of the green corn fields. He reflected deeply and came to the conclusion that the whole universe is built up through love and that the grief of separation is inescapable. And seeing this, he sat down under a tree and wept bitterly. From that day he had risen each morning at four o'clock to walk to the post office. In his whole life he had never received a letter, but with a devout serenity born of hope and faith he continued and was always the first to arrive.

The post office, one of the most uninteresting buildings in the world, became his place of pilgrimage. He always occupied a particular seat in a particular corner of the building, and when people got to know his habit they laughed at him. The postmen began to make a game of him. Even though there was no letter for him, they would call out his name for the fun of seeing him jump and come to the door. But with boundless faith and infinite patience he came every day—and went away empty-handed.

While Ali waited, peons would come for their firms' letters and he would hear them discussing their masters' scandals. These smart young peons in their spotless turbans and creaking shoes were always eager to express themselves. Meanwhile the door would be thrown open and the postmaster, a man with a head as sad and inexpressive as a pumpkin, would be seen sitting on his chair inside. There was no glimmer of animation in his features; and such men usually prove to be village schoolmasters, office clerks or postmasters.

One day he was there as usual and did not move from his seat when the door was opened.

"Police Commissioner!" the clerk called out, and a young fellow stepped forward briskly for the letters.

"Superintendent!" Another peon came; and so the clerk, like a worshipper of Vishnu, repeated his customary thousand names.

At last they had all gone. Ali too got up and, saluting the post office as though it housed some precious relic, went off, a pitiable



figure, a century behind his time.

"That fellow," asked the postmaster, "is he mad?"

"Who, sir? Oh yes," answered the clerk. "No matter what sort of weather, he has been here every day for the last five years. But he doesn't get many letters."

"I can well understand that! Who does he think will have time to write to him every day?"

"But he's a bit touched, sir. In the old days he committed many sins; and maybe he shed blood within some sacred precincts and is paying for it now," the postman added in support to his statement.

"Madmen are strange people," the postmaster said.

"Yes. Once I saw a madman in Ahmedabad who did absolutely nothing but make little heaps of dust. Another had a habit of going every day to the river in order to pour water on a certain stone!"

"Oh, that's nothing," chimed in another. "I knew one madman who paced up and down all day long, another who never ceased declaiming poetry, and a third who would slap himself on the cheek and then begin to cry out because he was being beaten."

And everyone in the post office began talking of lunacy. All working-class people have a habit of taking periodic rests by joining in general discussion for a few minutes. After listening a little, the postmaster got up and said:

"It seems as though the mad live in a world of their own making. To them, perhaps, we too, appear mad. The madman's world is rather like the poet's, I should think!"

He laughed as he spoke the last words, looking at one of the clerks who wrote indifferent verse. Then he went out and the office became still again.

For several days Ali had not come to the post office. There was no one with enough sympathy or understanding to guess the reason, but all were curious to know what had stopped the old man. At last he came again; but it was a struggle for him to breathe, and on his face were clear signs of his approaching end. That day he could not contain his impatience.

"Master Sahib," he begged the postmaster, "have you a letter from my Miriam?"



The postmaster was in a hurry to get out to the country.

"What a pest you are, brother!" he exclaimed.

"My name is Ali," answered Ali, absent-mindedly.

"I know! I know! But do you think we've got your Miriam's name registered?"

"Then please note it down, brother. It will be useful if a letter should come when I am not here." For how should the villager who had spent three quarters of his life hunting know that Miriam's name was not worth a pice to anyone but her father?

The postmaster was beginning to lose his temper. "Have you no sense?" he cried. "Get away! Do you think we are going to eat your letter when it comes?" And he walked off hastily. Ali came out very slowly, turning after every few steps to gaze at the post office. His eyes were filling with tears of helplessness, for his patience was exhausted, even though he still had faith. Yet how could he still hope to hear from Miriam?

Ali heard one of the clerks coming up behind him and turned to him.

"Brother!" he said.

The clerk was surprised, but being a decent fellow he said, "Well?"

"Here, look at this!" and Ali produced an old tin box and emptied five golden guineas into the surprised clerk's hands. "Do not look so startled," he continued, "they will be useful to you, and they can never be so to me. But will you do one thing?"

"What?"

"What do you see up there?" said Ali, pointing to the sky.

"Heaven."

"Allah is there, and in His presence I am giving you this money. When it comes, you must forward my Miriam's letter to me."

"But where—where am I to send it?" asked the utterly bewildered clerk.

"To my grave."

"What?"

"Yes. It is true. Today is my last day: my very last, alas! And I have not seen Miriam, I have had no letter from her." Tears were in Ali's eyes as the clerk slowly left him and went on his way with the

five golden guineas in his pocket.

Ali was never seen again and no one troubled to inquire after him.

One day, however, trouble came to the postmaster. His daughter lay ill in another town and he was anxiously waiting for news from her. The post was brought in and the letters piled on the table. Seeing an envelope of the color and shape he expected, the postmaster eagerly snatched it up. It was addressed to coachman Ali, and he dropped it as though it had given him an electric shock. The haughty temper of the official had quite left him in his sorrow and anxiety and had laid bare his human heart. He knew at once that this was the letter the old man had been waiting for: it must be from his daughter Miriam.

"Lakshmi Das!" called the postmaster, for such was the name of the clerk to whom Ali had given his money.

"Yes, sir?"

"This is for your old coachman Ali. Where is he now?"

"I will find out, sir."

The postmaster did not receive his own letter all that day.

He worried all night and, getting up at three, went to sit in the office. "When Ali comes at four o'clock," he mused, "I will give him the letter myself."

For now the postmaster understood all Ali's heart, and his very soul. After spending but a single night in suspense, anxiously waiting for news of his daughter, his heart was brimming with sympathy for the poor old man who had spent his nights for the last five years in the same suspense. At the stroke of five he heard a soft knock on the door: he felt sure it was Ali. He rose quickly from his chair, his suffering father's heart recognizing another, and flung the door wide open.

"Come in, brother Ali," he cried, handing the letter to the meek old man, bent double with age, who was standing outside. Ali was leaning on a stick and the tears were wet on his face as they had been when the clerk left him. But his features had been hard then and now they were softened by lines of kindliness. He lifted his eyes and in them was a light so unearthly that the postmaster shrank in fear

and astonishment.

Lakshmi Das had heard the postmaster's words as he came towards the office from another quarter. "Who was that, sir? Old Ali?" he asked. But the postmaster took no notice of him. He was staring with wide-open eyes at the doorway from which Ali had disappeared. Where could he have gone? At last he turned to Lakshmi Das. "Yes, I was speaking to Ali," he said.

"Old Ali is dead, sir. But give me his letter."

"What! But when? Are you sure, Lakshmi Das?"

"Yes, it is so," broke in a postman who had just arrived. "Ali died three months ago."

The postmaster was bewildered. Miriam's letter was still lying near the door; Ali's image was still before his eyes. He listened to Lakshmi Das' recital of the last interview, but he could still not doubt the reality of the knock on the door and the tears in Ali's eyes. He was perplexed. Had he really seen Ali? Had his imagination deceived him? Or had it perhaps been Lakshmi Das?

The daily routine began. The clerk read out the addresses—Police Commissioner, Superintendent, Librarian—and flung the letters deftly.

But the postmaster now watched them as though each contained a warm, beating heart. He no longer thought of them in terms of envelopes and postcards. He saw the essential, human worth of a letter.

That evening you might have seen Lakshmi Das and the postmaster walking with slow steps to Ali's grave. They laid the letter on it and turned back.

"Lakshmi Das, were you indeed the first to come to the office this morning?"

"Yes, sir, I was the first."

"Then how . . . No, I don't understand . . ."

"What, sir?"

"Oh, never mind," the postmaster said shortly. At the office he parted from Lakshmi Das and went in. The newly-waked father's heart in him was reproaching him for having failed to understand Ali's anxiety. Tortured by doubt and remorse, he sat down in the glow of the charcoal sigri to wait.

# The Nose Jewel

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

Translated from the Tamil by Swaminathan

**T**WO SPARROWS built a nest in a nice spot in the roof of Rammayya's house and the mother bird laid her eggs in it.

"My dear," began the male sparrow.

"And what do you want now?" asked his wife.

"Why does the lady of this house always quarrel with her husband?"

"How am I to know?" said the female bird. "Let us mind our own business."

"You are always self-centered," said the male sparrow and added, "Should we not help this poor Brahmin Rammayya?"

The female sparrow said with disdain, "Let me see what help you give. Please do not talk about what does not concern us. See that the cat does not come near our nest. That would be enough for you and me."

Somewhere in the muckheap lay a diamond nose jewel. The male bird picked it up and came to the nest with the shining stud in his beak and said to his wife: "Look! Do you like this?"

The wife-bird replied, "What am I to do with diamond nose studs or earrings? Find some grubs; the young ones are hungry."

The bird dropped the diamond stud on the floor and went out in search of little worms for the young ones.

Rammayya's wife noticed the jewel as she was sweeping the floor. She picked it up with delight and wore it.

Rammayya questioned her angrily, "How did you get hold of this diamond stud? Who is the scamp that makes presents to you without my knowledge?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I found it lying here yesterday and took it. That is all."

"We should go and deliver it to the village magistrate. If tomorrow the police should come and search our house, who is to stand the disgrace?"

In Minakshi Ammal's house nearby, the talk went thus: "I forgot and left it in the bathroom. Kuppayi, the servant woman, must have swept it out. She is very careless and ignorant."

The mother, Minakshi Ammal, consoled her little girl saying, "Let us search and find it. Don't tell father yet. He would go into a rage if he knew that you had lost the diamond nose stud."

"What is the secret you are whispering about?" asked Mr. Namathan Pillai.

The loss of the jewel had to be admitted. Soon the whole village knew about it. The maid servant, Kuppayi, was suspected by everyone to have stolen it.

The police came and searched her hut, but could not find anything.

Ramayya's heart was in a flutter. Ramayya's wife put the stud away in a box. She soon developed a severe fever and was confined to bed. No one thought of searching their house.

The he sparrow said, "Look at the fun, my dear; the lady of the house is scared and is down with fever."

"Nice fun indeed!" said the she sparrow. "The poor woman is in a panic. The fever may be the end of her."

"And a good thing too," said the cruel male sparrow.

"It is all your doing; you brought and threw it here and tempted her," said the female bird.

The male bird answered gravely, "Did I tell her to steal the thing? This is bound to happen when a woman is obstinate and disobeys her husband."

"I shall never disobey you, my husband," the mother bird said. "Come, let us go now and bring some worms for the young ones." And the two flew out.

# The Gypsy Woman

TARASHANKAR BANERJI

Translated from the Bengali by Lila Ray and others

SAMBHU, the conjuror, comes to this fair every year. His booth, like a custom, has come to stay. The local Estate People say it's only tricks: but Sambhu protests and insists it is "Magic: Circus." At the head of the entrance to the small tent, a small cloth banner also says: "Magic: Circus." To one side there's a picture of a tiger, to the other side of a man with a bloody sabre in one hand, in the other a severed head.

The fee is half an anna. The "magic" is a kaleidoscope: he hangs up pictures inside, in front a sheet with a lens sewed in the middle. Rustics, in dumb amazement, peer through the lens and gaze at "The Warring Britons," "The Emperor of Delhi," "The Hills of Kabul," "The Mausoleum of the Taj." Next, Sambhu performs on the rings.

Then comes the last act. Drawing aside a curtain, he displays a leopard in a cage and takes the animal out. The gypsy woman, Radhika, his wife, straddles the leopard. Then she dismounts, faces the animal, lifts its forepaws on to her shoulders, plants them there, kisses the leopard on the mouth. She finishes by thrusting her big bun of hair into its mouth; it looks as though she were putting her head right in.

This takes the onlooker's breath away; in a cold sweat he claps his hands. The show now ends, the audience troops away, and with the last of them Sambhu comes out to the tent door and beats on the huge kettledrum: da, da, da. This, his wife, Radhika, the gypsy woman, syncopates with a pair of tremendous cymbals: jhong, jhong, jhong.

There are pauses when Sambhu shouts, "Tiger! Ter-ri-fic tiger!"

The gypsy woman lifts up her voice and takes up, "And what does it do?"

"Becomes a Pegasus, takes a woman's kisses, puts a live head



into its mouth, but leaves it alone."

Then he dashes in and with a sharp pick stabs at the leopard: the latter lets forth a volley of growls. In fear and trepidation, the crowd, collected at the tent gate, makes a beeline for the entrance. At the door the gypsy woman collects half-anna bits and shows them in.

Apart from these, the gypsy woman has her own bag of tricks. She has a goat, a couple of monkeys, and a snake. At daybreak she takes her kit out to the village, moves from hut to hut, hits off her tricks and songs and brings in money.

But this year when Sambhu came for the fair he went into a terrible rage. Out of nowhere another conjuror had arrived and pitched his tent, opposite. His own patch was there, of course, waiting for him; but here was another, a bigger one at that, and very posh. Two horses were corralled outside. There was a giant cage on a bullock-cart, obviously housing a tiger.

Sambhu unyoked his three carts. Looking deadly daggers of hate at the new tent, he muttered curses under his breath. His face grew terrible. His whole physiognomy bore a stamp of cruel ferocity. His skin was a burnished copper—the kind of hateful copper that suggests distilled cruelty and wickedness. Tall of stature, full of a graceless stiffness, a deep furrow on the nose under the brow, small round snake-like eyes, jutting teeth flanked by canines wide awake in arched ferocity: this was Sambhu. Envy and anger made him even more frightening.

Envy and anger also worked on Radhika. She quivered like bright steel under a light and said: "Just you wait; I'll put a cobra in that cage of yours."

Her anger roused more fury in him. With long, angry strides he entered the new tent and shouted: "Who's there? Where's the boss?"

"Here, what d'ye want?" and there emerged from behind a curtain a strapping youth, six feet and more, strong of limb and wind, pleasing to the eye. Tall and lithe of body, he shone like a strong young horse—black, with a long aquiline nose, ordinary eyes, a narrow waxed moustache painting his upper lip, a head of luxuriant curls, on his chest a small golden amulet on a black twine round the neck. He came and stood before Sambhu. Each scanned the other.

"What d'ye want?" the newcomer asked again, as his breath filled Sambhu's nostrils with the smell of wine.

Sambhu's right hand lunged and grabbed the other's left. He said, "This is my patch, and has been for five years."

The youth caught Sambhu's left hand with his right, laughed like a drunken man, said: "Right you are, but, look, come and have a drink."

A tambourine struck up a swift octave. It was Radhika's laugh. She had come and now stood behind Sambhu. She snapped: "You're very rich, aren't you, darling; how much would you have to go round?"

The youth's eyes turned from Sambhu, landed on Radhika and were glued. There was intoxication in the woman's body, tall and slim, much as a black snake's; there was intoxication in her thick locks parted by a thin white line in the middle, in her slightly arched nose, in her half-shut drunk-making eyes, in her pointed chin. There was intoxication all over.

Radhika did not cease her laughter. But, now observing the youth's silent wonder, she said again: "What, darling, robbed of your speech, or are you?"

The conjuror at length broke into a smile: "What a thing to say to a gypsy's son! The very thought, indeed! Come, enter."

It's true. This strange race never buy their wine, nor ever run out. They distill on the quiet, are caught, and put in prison. But they don't leave off. Even in the eyes of the law it is regarded as a matter of no consequence—cases come up every day.

Sambhu took a deep breath. The host, then, was his own race, after all. Or else—he turned to Radhika and gave her a hard look. "And what brought you here?" he snapped.

Radhika started on her peals of laughter again: "Blast you, not for a drink on him, surely."

Inside the tent they sat down to a carousal. The floor was littered with puffed rice and the small bones of game. On a leaf were the remnants of meat, on another some more puffed rice, onion chili, a peck of salt. Two empty bottles lay about. A third was half empty. By its side, in deshabelle, lay a gypsy girl, drunk, her tousled hair matted with dust, her hands stretched above her head, prone on the

earth, the toddy forming bubbles on her mouth, a plump, quiet girl.

Radhika saw her and again she broke into peals of laughter. "Your woman, is she?" she asked. "Fancy going down like that, like a lopped banana trunk!"

The new conjuror smiled, sauntered across and, scooping out some loose earth, brought out a couple of bottles. They drank, but the newcomer and Radhika alone kept up the conversation. Even in his drunkenness Sambhu was silent. Radhika finished her first glass and said: "What's your name, conjuror?"

The newcomer bit off a green chilli with his teeth and said: "You will curse me, woman, if I tell you."

"Why?"

"I am Kisto."

"But why should I curse you?"

"Because, woman, you are Radhika. There, I've told you."

Radhika heaved in laughter. But the next instant with a swift hand she had taken out something from the folds of her cloth, flung it at the new man, and said: "Here, take this; show us, Kisto, how you take the serpent."

Sambhu cowered. But with a swift hand the other gypsy hit the viper down to the ground: it was a young krait! The hurt young snake hissed and spread its hood to bite. Sambhu yelled, "Unshaven!"—meaning the fangs had not been drawn. But in that split second Kisto with his left hand held the snake under the hood and started to laugh. Laughing away, he took out a folded knife from his waist, opened it with his teeth, cut into the snake's jaws, took out its fangs and pouches and flung them away. Then he threw the snake back at Radhika, who caught it with her left hand. But the next moment she was angry and terrible as the snake herself: "How dare you shave my snake?"

"But you asked me to take it, didn't you?" Kisto said. And now it was his turn to burst into peals of laughter.

It was dusk. The new tent was starting off this evening. They had built a platform outside and started playing music on it. A petrol lamp was being lighted. Radhika came and stood outside her small tent. Her eyes burnt fiercely.

Close by, under a tree, Sambhu was saying his nemaz. A little further under another tree, Kisto was saying his. They are a strange race, these gypsies. Ask them who they are, and they will say they are gypsies. But their religion is Islam. In rituals they are full-blown Hindus: they worship the Manasha, observe the bratas of Mangal, Candi, Sasthi. Supine on the floor, they worship Kali and Durga. They name their children Sambhu, Siva, Krishna, Hari, Kali, Durga, Radha, Lakshmi. They know Hindu mythical lore faultlessly by heart. There is yet another community who are just like them. They are people who paint pictures and sing Hindu myths to illustrate them. They call themselves Patnas, painters. And true enough, they are a race of prodigious painters.

Sambhu finished his nemaz and came up. Spite and hate contended in the woman's voice, which said: "You will get nobody to see your old beast perform."

Sambhu growled: "You seem to know everything!"

Radhika stuck her nose in the air: "Not surely as much as you do!"

Sambhu was silent, but Radhika was not. There was a moment's pause. Then she flared up: "Ah, you corpse! Why don't you realize that nobody cares for an old thing's capers? And he comes and talks about knowing!"

In an instant Sambhu went completely wild. He bared his teeth like a tiger and snapped ferociously: "Already! Very gushy on young things! So!"

Radhika hissed like a cobra: "What did you say, you wretch!"

Sambhu did not say another word, just walked away.

Angry tears rolled down Radhika's cheeks. How dared he say that, the ungrateful beast! Surely, he hadn't forgotten! And what about himself? Wasn't he forty? Wasn't he old? What was he but an old wretch for Radhika? And her only twenty-two! Had she none other than Sambhu to choose from? Radhika rushed back into her tent.

It was true. There was the time five years ago. Radhika was then seventeen. Three years before she had been married to Sivapada, who was then three years her senior. Even now she felt sorry to think

of him. Quiet by nature, he had a kindly face and big eyes. And didn't they have charm—those eyes! Such a dart! He had no use for snakes, monkeys or goats. He worked on cane, wove baskets, the bottoms of chairs and palanquins, fancy flower pots. That way he earned more than any other. Husband and wife went out to work—he with his work basket on his shoulders; she with her basket filled with snake, monkey, and goat. Sivapada used to carry another thing in his waist: a bamboo reed pipe. When Radhika sang to make her snake perform, he would play on his pipe in accompaniment.

Sivapada had yet another feather in his cap. He was called to the council of the gypsy elders. There he was accepted for his quiet, steady counsel and because he had taught himself to read and write. He held the respect of the village. Such a fellow was Radhika's slave. All his money used to be for her. She loved to wear a kind of sari with a background worked in small white checks. Sivapada gave them to her all the year round.

Then out of the blue came Sambhu—after an absence of ten years. Nobody knew how and where he had spent them. Here he was, with a leopard, a patched-up tent, and a gypsy woman robbed of her youth. The tiger and the tent made a great impression. Word went round. Radhika still remembered the day she first met Sambhu. She was amazed to see the copper-hued, insolent, rough and tumble fellow.

Sambhu had gazed at her in unconcealed admiration. Then he had called out: "Here, show us your snakes, woman!" Something had come over Radhika. She had smiled and said: "Aha! The beau condescends! Will he pay?"

And she remembers Sambhu had said: "I won't. But if you will show me your snake, I'll show you my tiger."

Tiger! Radhika had been struck dumb. Who was this man? A fellow as strange as his words and masterful. Says he will show you a tiger! She had looked sharply at him and said: "Sure?"

"Right you are, better come and see it first if you like it that way." He had taken her into the tent and showed her the tiger. Astonished, she had asked: "And what do you do with it?"

"I fight him. I make him perform!"

"Yes?"

"Sure! Come and see." Then he had opened the trap door, taken out the leopard, made it rise on its hind legs, put its forepaws on his shoulders, and stood face to face. She well remembered the overwhelming impression this had made on her. Sambhu had put the leopard back in its cage, turned to Radhika and said: "Now show me your snake."

Radhika had parried and said: "You have tamed it, haven't you?"

This had pleased Sambhu. He had laughed and suddenly taken her in his strong arms and said: "Sure! I specialize in taming tigresses."

A strange thing had come over Radhika. She did not falter. A few days later she took all of Sivapada's savings and walked into Sambhu's tent. She did not turn a hair. Sivapada had cried his eyes out. That, far from softening her or causing remorse, had merely filled her with mortal contempt. Her parents, her villagers, spat on her. She didn't care.

With Sivapada's money, Sambhu bought his tent and outfit. They had gone through that money now. They were broke. Whatever Sambhu earned these days went on drink. But not once had Radhika regretted her step. But today the ungrateful beast had said it! She sat down to a bottle of wine.

There in the new tent the band struck up again. The second show must be on. Toddy made her vicious. The music lit up flames of envy. How about setting the tent on fire!

All at once she heard Sambhu's angry shouts outside. She came out, nerves on edge. Kisto, resplendently dressed, stood face to face with Sambhu. Sambhu's eyes were bloodshot. "Now, listen," he said.

"What have I done to deserve this? You are now showing, while we are, that's all there's to it. But, mind you, we asked you in! And why shouldn't you?"

Sambhu barked: "To see you perform? What impertinence! How dare you!"

Before he had time to reply, Radhika, worked up to madness, had picked up a brick and hurled it with unerring aim at Kisto. But the latter with the most amazing casualness caught the brick and



went away, holding it with both hands. This was enough to take Radhika's breath away—but only for a second. The next moment she collected herself and took aim a second time. Sambhu stopped her and, caressing her hand, took her in. She flung herself on his neck. A great emotion seized her and she sobbed her heart out.

Sambhu said: "We shall buy our own leopard directly when the fair is over."

Kisto's voice floated in from the other tent. "Put up the flaps, up with the canvas, away." Through a rent in the wall Radhika saw that they were putting up the canvas in the other tent. Now there would be no getting away from the show. It poured in. She groaned in anger. "I'll set the tent on fire," she said.

Sambhu went away very quiet. Kisto stood up on the back of a running horse and made circles. Radhika let out a deep sigh and said, "Time you tried your hand at new games. Else we are lost. The old ones won't do and none will come to us."

Sambhu muttered between his teeth: "I'll swing the swine first thing tomorrow. I'll tell the police. Tell them about the toddy."

Out there a parrot fired a cannon. That other girl took an umbrella and walked on a tight rope. Kisto fought his tiger. To cap it all, the leopard even mauled him once.

Radhika thought of their poor repertoire. Tears scalded her cheeks. Spite filled her. What would it be like if the other tent went down in a heap of ashes? How about pouring on some kerosene and striking a match?

Radhika woke late next morning. Sambhu was not there: perhaps he had gone to find a few hands in the village. She came out, shuddered. Policemen had made a ring round Kisto's tent. There was an inspector at his door. She thought she must find out, so she went and saluted him. The inspector scanned her from head to foot and said: "Call them. There's to be a search."

The gypsy woman saluted again and said: "What's wrong, sir?"

"Come to look for toddy. Call the men. No, don't get inside. Call out from here."

Radhika realized that the inspector had thought she belonged to the tent. She did not correct him, however. She said: "I have my baby

in there, sir."

"Right, you can fetch it. And call the men."

Radhika entered and strode to the corner, scooped out the loose earth and uncovered three bottles. She pulled a cloth, packed the bottles in its folds, and so held the bundle to her bosom that nobody could possibly tell it from a very young baby wrapped in swaddling clothes on a winter morning. Kisto was there, snoring away. She gave him a kick, woke him up: "Get up, there's a raid on, the police are at the door."

Holding the "baby" to her bosom, she walked out and away with firm, easy steps. On her heels came Kisto and stood before the inspector.

"This is your tent?" asked the inspector.

Kisto saluted: "Yes, your honor."

"We want to look inside. Any toddy?"

By that time the gypsy woman, with the "baby" at her breast, had melted in the crowd—like a drop of water in water.

Sambhu sat very still. Radhika crouched on her knees, prone on the ground, and heaved with sobs. Sambhu had cruelly beaten her. On Sambhu's return she had told him her exploits, how she had deceived the police. She had thrown herself on him in her mirthful triumph and said: "That was a clever one on the inspector, you must agree, or won't you?"

Sambhu had hurled a look of mortal hatred at Radhika. But she was in no mood to notice it and continued playfully: "Come, try a bottle of baby for a change."

All at once Sambhu had caught her by the hair and laid about her mercilessly. "You wretch," he rapped out. "You spoilt everything. I asked the police in to put him in the jug! That's what I did, blast your monkey tricks!"

Radhika had flared up, but dropped as soon as she remembered last night's conversation. Sambhu had spoken true enough. She did not say another word, but endured all his tortures, crouched on her knees, and wept.

Their tent also resumed its shows this evening.

Sambhu put on his old wornout suit: black pantaloons with spindly legs, a black coat with worn sleeves. Radhika wore an old motley skirt and a very old bodice with long sleeves. On other evenings she would put up her hair. But tonight she didn't. She did not care: she felt so low and humiliated. She wished the earth would open under her feet. In the other tent that other girl, round like a tabby and plump to obesity, had put on a very tight blouse and vest, short knickers of green satin worked in gold, and a sort of bodice like a brassiere. Even that ball of fat looked presentable in her clothes. Even their kettledrum had a more ringing sound. While here was this drum, old as old, damp like wet leather.

Undaunted all the same, she struck her cymbals with all her might.

Sambhu paused and shouted: "Tiger! Ter-ri-fic tiger!"

Radhika cleared her throat and barked: "And what does it do?"

Sambhu answered lustily: "Becomes a Pegasus, takes a woman's kisses, puts a live head into its mouth, but leaves it alone."

He gave a leap, rushed in, lunged at his tiger. The weary old brute howled, more a shriek than a roar.

Immediately the air rang and echoed with the vicious angry roar of the young tiger in the other tent. Radhika stood on the platform. She felt giddy. She cast a glance at the other platform. Kisto stood there, smiling. Their eyes met and Kisto shouted: "Now, once again! Go!"

From the other tent, pricked a second time, the tiger gave a mighty roar. Her eyes flashed fire.

The crowd streamed into Kisto's tent.

A very few men, out for cheap fun, entered Sambhu's tent. He finished the show and sat down with a fearful face, a few annas in his hand. Radhika swiftly went out into the fair and returned in a little while with a canister.

Angry but curious, Sambhu asked: "What's that?"

"Kerosene. I'll set the other tent on fire. Pity, couldn't get a full tin." Her eyes burned.

His eyes, too, lit up with a ferocious gleam. "Fetch the wine," he said.

They drank. Radhika said: "It'll make a jolly fine sight when it's

ablaze."

She burst into peals of mirth. She came out in the dark. In the other tent the show was still on. Through the rent near the roof she saw Kisto performing on the flying trapeze and heard the audience clap.

Sambhu pulled her in and said: "Not now, but at dead of night. Come."

Once again they sat down to drink.

The whole fair was quiet, gone to sleep. Darkness filled everything. Quietly the gypsy woman rose. She hadn't had a wink of sleep. An irrepressible listlessness, a searing pain tormented her. She came out. Dark night reigned: all was quiet and still. She made a reconnaissance. Nobody stirred. She entered her tent, struck a match and spied the kerosene tin in the corner. Her husband lay curled up in the cold, like a dog, and fast asleep. Anger and shame filled her heart. The plague upon a man who sleeps over an insult! She did not wake him. She tucked the matches in her hair, took the tin and went out.

She must do it from the back, people mustn't notice it until the back was completely burned back, completely burned down. She went in the dark like a deadly snake, a dark thing in the dark. She went round to the back of the tent, put down the tin and panted from the effort.

She sat down awhile to regain her breath. Then suddenly she wanted to have a peep in. She raised a corner of the tent flap, went flat on her chest and craned her neck in. It was pitch dark inside. The woman crawled in like a reptile. She took the matches from her hair and struck one.

Right at her hand, Kisto lay like a giant fast asleep. The match burned in her hand and lit up his face, a strong, brave face, the chest wide as a deck, the muscles of the arm round and strong. All around him were hoof marks—Kisto danced on the back of a prancing steed! There on the shoulder, too, was the fresh gape of the wound the tiger had made! The match went out.

All at once a mighty storm swept the woman's breast. The same as when she had first met Sambhu. But this one was mightier than

ever. In the twinkling of an eye, the woman did what was beyond her wildest dreams. An insane emotion seized her and she flung herself on Kisto's breast.

Kisto woke, but he was not startled. He held the slip of a woman in his strong embrace and said: "Who is it? Radhi?"

She put her hand on his mouth and muttered: "Yes, sh-sh."

He covered her mouth with kisses: "Wait, I'll fetch the wine."

"No, you won't. Come. Get up quick. We must get away." She panted in the darkness.

He said: "Where?"

"There, away, in the far country."

"In the far country? What about the tent and all—"

"Leave them alone. Sambhu will take them. Won't you leave him his price for his Radhi?" She laughed long and low under her breath.

Mad, mad in his impetuous youth, the gypsy did not falter. "Let's go," he said.

They had gone a pace when Radhika stopped and said: "Wait a moment."

She went back, poured the tin of kerosene over Sambhu's tent and left a wake of oil on the grass. She struck a match and set it to the oil. She gurgled with laughter: "Serves him right, the old buzzard! Let's go."

# The Gold Watch

MULK RAJ ANAND

THERE WAS SOMETHING about the smile of Mr. Acton when he came over to Srijut Sudarshan Sharma's table which betokened disaster. But as the Sahib had only said, "Mr. Sharma, I have brought something specially for you from London—you must come into my office on Monday and take it . . .," the poor old dispatch clerk could not surmise the real meaning of the General Manager's remark. The fact that Mr. Acton should come over to his table at all, fawn upon him and say what he had said was, of course, most flattering, for very rarely did the head of the firm condescend to move down the corridor where the Indian staff of the distribution department of the great Marmalade Empire of Henry King & Co. worked.

But that smile on Mr. Acton's face! Specially as Mr. Acton was not known to smile too much, being a morose old Sahib, hard working, conscientious, and a slave driver, famous as a shrewd businessman, so devoted to the job of spreading the monopoly of King's Marmalade and sundry other products that his wife had left him after a three months' spell of marriage and never returned to India, though no one quite knew whether she was separated or divorced from him or merely preferred to stay away. So the fact that Acton Sahib should smile was enough to give Srijut Sharma cause for thought. But then Srijut Sharma was, in spite of his nobility of soul and fundamental innocence, experienced enough in his study of the vague, detached faces of the white Sahibs by now and had clearly noticed the slight awkward curl of the upper lip, behind which the determined tobacco-stained long teeth showed for the briefest moment a snarl suppressed by the deliberation which Acton Sahib had brought to the whole operation of coming over and pronouncing those kinds words. And what could be the reason for his having been singled out from among the twenty-five odd members of the distribution department? In the usual way, he, the dispatch clerk,



only received an occasional greeting, "Hello, Sharma—how you getting on?" from the head of his own department, Mr. West Sahib, for a reprimand because some letters or packets had gone astray; otherwise, he himself being the incarnation of clockwork efficiency and well-versed in the routine of his job, there was no occasion for any break in the monotony of that anonymous, smooth working Empire, so far at least as he was concerned.

To be sure, there was the continual gossip of the clerks and the accountants, the bickerings and jealousies of the people above him for grades and promotions and pay, but he, Sharma, had been employed twenty years ago as a special favor, was not even a matriculate, but had picked up the work somehow and, though unwanted and constantly reprimanded by West Sahib in the first few years, had been retained in his job because of the general legend of saintliness which he had acquired . . . He had five more years of service to do, because then he would be fifty-five and the family-raising, *grhst* portion of his life in the fourfold scheme, prescribed by religion, finished. He hoped to retire to his home town, Jullundhur, where his father still ran the confectioner's shop off the Mall Road.

"And what did Acton Sahib have to say to you, Mr. Sharma?" asked Miss Violet Dixon, the plain snub-nosed Anglo-Indian typist in her sing-song.

Since he was an old family man of fifty who had greyed prematurely, she considered her virginity safe enough with this "gentleman" and freely conversed with him, specially during the lunch hour, while she considered almost everyone else as having only one goal in life—to sleep with her.

"Han," he said, "he has brought something for me from England," Srijut Sharma answered.

"There are such pretty things in U.K.," she said. "My! I wish I could go there! . . . My sister is there, you know! Married! . . ."

She had told Sharma all these things before. So he was not interested. Specially today, because all his thoughts were concentrated on the inner meaning of Mr. Acton's sudden visitation and the ambivalent smile.

"Well, half day today, I am off," said Violet and moved away with the peculiar snobbish agility of the Mem Sahib she affected to be.

Srijut Sharma stared at her blankly, though taking her regular form into his subconscious with more than the old uncle's interest he had always pretended. It was only her snub nose, like that of Sarup-naka, the sister of the demon king, Ravana, that stood in the way of her being married, he felt sure, for otherwise she had a tolerable figure. But he lowered his eyes as soon as the thought of Miss Dixon's body began to simmer in the cauldron of his inner life because, as a good Hindu, every woman, apart from the wife, was to him a mother or a sister. And his obsession about the meaning of Acton Sahib's words returned, from the pent-up curiosity, with greater force now that he realized the vastness of the space of time during which he would have to wait in suspense before knowing what the boss had brought for him and why.

He took up his faded sola topee, which was, apart from the bush shirt and trousers, one of the few concessions to modernity which he had made throughout his life as a good Brahmin, got up from his chair, beckoned Dugdu from the verandah on his way out and asked: "Has Acton Sahib gone, you know?"

"Abhi-Sahib in lift, going down," Dugdu said.

Srijut Sharma made quickly for the stairs and, throwing all caution about slipping on the polished marble steps to the winds, hurtled down. There were three floors below him and he began to sweat, both through fear of missing the Sahib and the heat of mid-April. As he got to the ground floor he saw Acton Sahib already going out of the door.

It was now or never.

Srijut Sharma rushed out. But he was conscious that quite a few employees of the firm would be coming out of the two lifts and he might be seen talking to the Sahib. And that was not done—outside the office. The Sahibs belonged to their private world where no intrusion was tolerated, for they refused to listen to pleas for advancement through improper channels.

Mr. Acton's uniformed driver opened the door of the polished Buick and the Sahib sat down, spreading the shadow of grimness all around him.

Srijut Sharma hesitated, for the demeanor of the Goanese chauffeur was frightening.

By now the driver had smartly shut the back door of the car and was proceeding to his seat.

That was his only chance.

Taking off his hat, he rushed up to the window of the car and rudely thrust his face into the presence of Mr. Acton.

Luckily for him the Sahib did not brush him aside, but smiled a broader smile than that of a few minutes ago and said: "You want to know what I have brought for you—well, it is a gold watch with an inscription on it. See me Monday morning . . ." The Sahib's initiative in anticipating his question threw Srijut Sharma further off his balance. The sweat just poured down from his forehead, even as he mumbled, "Thank you, Sir, thank you . . ."

"Chalo, driver!" the Sahib ordered.

And the chauffeur turned and looked hard at Srijut Sharma.

The despatch clerk withdrew with a sheepish, abject smile on his face and stood, hat in left hand, the right hand raised to his forehead in the attitude of a nearly military salute.

The motor car moved off.

But Srijut Sharma stood still, as though he had been struck dumb. He was neither happy nor sad at this moment—only numbed by the shock of surprise. Why should he be singled out from the whole distribution department of Henry King & Co. for the privilege of the gift of a gold watch! . . . He had done nothing brave that he could remember. "A gold watch, with an inscription on it!" Oh, he knew now—the intuitive truth rose inside him—the Sahib wanted him to retire . . .

The revelation rose to the surface of his awareness from the deep obsessive fear which had possessed him for nearly half an hour, and his heart began to palpitate against his will, and the sweat sozzled his body. He reeled a little, then adjusted himself and got onto the pavement, looking after the car which had already turned the corner into Nicol Road.

He turned and began to walk towards Victoria Terminus Station to take his train to Thana, thirty miles out, where he had resided for cheapness almost all the years he had been in Bombay. His steps were heavy, for he was reasonably sure now that he would get notice of retirement on Monday. He tried to think of some other possible

reason why the Sahib may have decided to give him the gift of a gold watch with an inscription. There was no other explanation. His doom was sealed. What would he say to his wife? And his son had still not passed his Matric. How would he support the family? The provident fund would not amount to very much, specially in these days of rising prices . . .

He felt a pull at his heart. He paused for breath and tried to calm himself. The old blood pressure! Or was it merely wind? . . . He must not get into a panic at any cost. He steadied his gait and walked along muttering to himself, "Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!" as though the very incantation of the formula of peace would restore him to calm and equanimity.

During the weekend, Srijut Sharma was able to conceal his panic and confusion behind the façade of an exaggerated *bonhomie* with the skill of an accomplished actor. On Saturday night he went with his wife and son to see Professor Ram's circus which was performing opposite the Portuguese Church. He spent a little longer on his prayers, but otherwise seemed normal enough on the surface. Only he ate very little of the gala meal of the rice kichri put before him by his wife and seemed lost in thought for a few moments at a time. And his illiterate but shrewd wife noticed that there was something on his mind.

"Thou hast not eaten at all today," she said as he left the tasty papadum and the mango pickle untouched. "Look at Hari! He has left nothing in his thali!"

"Hoon," he answered abstractedly. And then, realizing that he might be found out for the worried, unhappy man he was, he tried to bluff her. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking of some happy news that the Sahib gave me yesterday: he said he had brought a gold watch as a gift for me from Vilayat . . ."

"Then, Papaji, give me the silver watch you are using now," said Hari, his young son, impetuously. "I have no watch at all and am always late everywhere."

"Not so impatient, son!" counseled Hari's mother. "Let your father get the gold watch first and then . . . he will surely give you his silver watch!"

In the ordinary way, Srijut Sudarshan Sharma would have endorsed his wife's sentiments. But today he felt that, on the face of it, his son's demand was justified. How should Hari know that the silver watch, the gold watch and a gold ring would be all the jewelry he, the father, would have for security against hard days if the gold watch was, as he prognosticated, only a token being offered by the firm to sugarcoat the bitter pill they would ask him to swallow—retirement five years before the appointed time! He hesitated, then lifted his head, smiled at his son and said:

"Acha, Kaka, you can have my silver watch . . ."

"Can I have it really, Papaji, hurry!" the boy said, getting up to fetch it from his father's pocket. "Give it to me now, today!"

"Vay, son, you are so selfish!" his mother exclaimed. For, with the peculiar sensitiveness of the woman, she had surmised from the manner in which her husband had hung his head and then tried to smile as he lifted his face to his son that the father of Hari was upset inside him or at least not in his usual mood of accepting life evenly, accompanying this acceptance with the pious invocation, "Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!"

Hari brought the silver watch, adjusted it to his left ear to see if it ticked and, happy in the possession of it, capered a little caper.

Srijut Sharma did not say anything, but pushing his thali away got up to wash his hands.

The next day it happened as Srijut Sharma had anticipated.

He went in to see Mr. Acton as soon as the Sahib came in, for the suspense of the weekend had mounted to a crescendo by Monday morning and he had been trembling with trepidation, pale and completely unsure of himself. The General Manager called him in immediately and the peon Dugdu presented the little slip with the despatch clerk's name on it.

"Please sit down," said Mr. Acton, lifting his grey-haired head from the papers before him. And then, pulling his keys from his trousers pocket by the gold chain to which they were adjusted, he opened a drawer and fetched out what Sharma thought was a beautiful red case.

"Mr. Sharma, you have been a loyal friend of this firm for many



years . . . and . . . you know, your loyalty has been your greatest asset here . . . because . . . er . . . otherwise, we could have got someone with better qualifications to do your work! Now . . . we are thinking of increasing the efficiency of the business all around! And, well, we feel that you would also like, at your age, to retire to your native Punjab . . . So, as a token of our appreciation for your loyalty to Henry King & Co., we are presenting you this gold watch . . ." And he pushed the red case towards him.

"Sahib! . . ." Srijut Sharma began to speak, but though his mouth opened, he could not go on. "I am only fifty years old," he wanted to say, "and I still have five years to go." His facial muscles seemed to contract, his eyes were dimmed with the fumes of frustration and bitterness, his forehead was covered with sweat. At least they might have made a little ceremony of the presentation. He could not even utter the words, "Thank you, Sir."

"Of course, you will also have your provident fund and one month's leave with pay before you retire . . ."

Again Srijut Sharma tried to voice his inner protest in words which would convey his meaning without seeming to be disloyal, for he did not want to obliterate the one concession the Sahib had made to the whole record of his service with his firm. It was just likely that Mr. Acton might remind him of his failings as a despatch clerk if he should as much as indicate that he was unamenable to the suggestion made by the Sahib on behalf of Henry King & Co.

"Look at the watch—it has an inscription on it which will please you," said Mr. Acton to get over the embarrassment created by the silence of the despatch clerk.

These words hypnotized Sharma and, stretching his hands across the large table, he reached out heavily for the gift.

Mr. Acton noticed the unsureness of his hand and pushed it gently forward.

Srijut Sharma picked up the red box, but, in his eagerness to follow the Sahib's behests, dropped it even as he had held it aloft and tried to open it.

The Sahib's face was livid as he picked up the box and hurriedly opened it. Then, lifting the watch from its socket, he wound it and applied it to his ear. It was ticking. He turned it round and showed



the inscription to the despatch clerk.

Srijut Sharma put both his hands out, more steadily this time, and took the gift in the manner in which a beggar receives alms. He brought the glistening object within the orbit of his eyes, but they were dimmed with tears and he could not read anything. He tried to smile, however, and then, with a great heave of his will which rocked his body from side to side, pronounced the words, "Thank you, Sir . . ."

Mr. Acton got up, took the gold watch from Srijut Sharma's hands and put it back in the socket of the red case. Then he stretched his right hand towards the despatch clerk with a brisk shake-hand gesture and offered the case to him with his left hand.

Srijut Sharma instinctively took the Sahib's right hand gratefully in his two sweating hands and then opened the palms out to receive the case.

"Good luck, Sharma," Mr. Acton said. "Come and see me after your leave is over. And when your son matriculates let me know if I can do something for him . . ."

Dumb and with bent head, the fumes of his violent emotions rising above the mouth which could have expressed them, he withdrew in the abject manner of his ancestors going out of the presence of a feudal lord.

Mr. Acton saw the danger to the watch and went ahead to open the door so that the clerk could go out without knocking his head against the door or falling down.

As Srijut Sharma emerged from the General Manager's office, tears involuntarily flowed from his eyes and his lower lip fell in a pout that somehow controlled him from breaking down completely.

The eyes of the whole office staff were on him. In a moment, a few of the men clustered around his person. One of them took the case from his hands, opened it and read the inscription out loud: "In appreciation of the loyal service of Mr. Sharma to Henry King & Co. on his retirement."

The curiosity of his colleagues became a little less enthusiastic though the watch passed from hand to hand.

Unable to stand because of the waves of dizziness that swirled in his head, Srijut Sudarshan Sharma sat down on his chair with his

head hidden in his hands and allowed the tears to roll down. One of his colleagues, Mr. Banaji, the accountant, patted his back understandingly. But the pity was too much for him.

"To be sure, Seth Makanji, the new partner, has a relation to fill Sharma's position," one said.

"No, no," another refuted him. "No one is required to kill himself with work in our big concern . . . We are given the Sunday off! And a fat pension years before it is due. The bosses are full of love for us! . . ."

"Damn fine gold watch, but it does not go!" said Shri Raman the typist.

Mr. Banaji took the watch from Srijut Raman and, putting it in the case, placed it before Srijut Sharma as he signed the others to move away.

As Srijut Sharma realized that his colleagues had drifted away, he lifted his morose head, took the case, as well as his hat, and began to walk away. Mr. Banaji saw him off to the door, his hand on Sharma's back. "Sahibji," the parsi accountant said as the lift came up and the liftman took Sharma in.

On the way home he found that the gold watch only went when it was shaken. Obviously some delicate part had broken when he had dropped it on Mr. Acton's table. He would get it mended, but he must save all the cash he could get hold of and not go spending it on the luxury of having a watch repaired now. He shouldn't have been weak with his son and given him his old silver watch. But as there would be no office to attend, he would not need to look at the time very much, specially in Jullundhur where time just stood still and no one bothered about keeping appointments.

# Natu's Last Hours

BUDDHADEVA BOSE

Translated from the Bengali by Jyotirmoy Datta

RETURNING FROM WORK that day, Bhupati found a folded slip of paper on his table. It was almost dusk; there was little light in the room. He had to bring it close to his eyes to read:

"Am leaving; you'll never get me back; leaving Natu in your care."

After reading it twice, Bhupati rolled the note into a ball and was on the point of throwing it away, but suddenly he put it into his pocket instead. With firm steps he strode back from the window, took off his shirt and flung it away, then switched on the light and sat directly beneath the fan to dry his perspiring hulk. Bhupati was not tall, really, but strongly built; the sleeveless undershirt revealed his sinuous arms; and a pungent smell from his armpits hit his senses so that his nostrils dilated a little. He was thirty-two, and though, because of his thinning hair, he usually looked a little older, now that his shirt was off an observer could have noticed the gleaming blood under his firmly stretched skin.

Paresh entered the room and asked: "Should I serve the tea, sir, or would you prefer to bathe first?"

"Tea." Bhupati slipped off his *kabulis*<sup>1</sup> without rising and shoved them under the bed with his feet. Natu walked in and stood by his side, almost touching him, and gazed at him out of his wide eyes. Dark eyes, as if they were painted black, with nothing in them but a humble appeal. His long, opulent tail flew like a pennant. Natu sniffed and, having sniffed, uttered a few beseeching whines. In answer, Bhupati laid his hand on his haunches.

This slight show of tenderness was license enough. Natu laid his head on Bhupati's knees. Bhupati pushed him aside with a grunt. "Off. Be off."

<sup>1</sup> A variety of Indian "casuals."

Mere animal, he, unintelligent, deaf to language. Thinking it to be an invitation to play, Natu raised his forelegs onto Bhupati's lap, his long, goddess-Kali-like tongue dangling and dancing in excitement.

"Today I will kill you. Today you die. Follow me?"

Natu was unmoved. The white spot on his breast swam into view, an island surrounded by a shimmering expanse of burnt sienna. And from his pink tongue, free from all symptoms of constipation, oozed the saliva of the healthy.

Paresh brought in the tea. He said: "The mistress is out. Anything else you need, sir?"

"Remove Natu."

"Natu—Natni—Nataraj . . ." Paresh imitated the caressing baby-talk of his absent mistress. "Come along, your dinner's ready."

But Natu, struck by a sound in the street, suddenly darted for the balcony and stood for a while gazing out of the bars of the railing. It was to Bhupati that he returned and whined again, softly. Bhupati did not return Natu's gaze, but, instead, in his mind he addressed a long speech to Natu:

"Don't you know that I am not the one who harbored you, no, nor your dam either? All that is Madame Lakshmi's doing, yes, the same Lakshmi Devi who left me a note which I crushed into my pocket only a little while ago. I do not like animals in the house, in fact I detest them—but Lakshmi Devi is a free agent and why shouldn't she satisfy her whims? Moreover, when it is Dinesh Ganguly who is offering a dog, how could there be even the thought of refusal? Dinesh Ganguly—know him?—that one who sports *punjabis*\* with fancy pleats, that fair and slender gent with eyes brimming with feeling, who is published in all the Bengali and English dailies in the country, who has visited Paris and Peking and brought a red lacquer box from Bangkok for Lakshmi Devi—that's Dinesh Ganguly. Yes, he is the guy who makes Lakshmi Devi sit up till two in the morning with his talk—while I snore in the next room—or am supposed to do so. It was he who made a gift of your mamma. Some sort of a local beauty, she, her first spring was not

\* Punjabi: a loose shirt, generally of fine white cotton, which serves Bengali gentlemen as an upper garment. It is dandyish to have the sleeves pleated.

wasted; without letting on who your father was, she gave birth to the five of you one day, and a month later she was dead, crushed by the wheel of a truck. I saw her after the event. Her abdomen was bloated, two molars bared as they used to be when, a newcomer to the household, anyone approached while she was at her food. Happy was her death, but I won't let you die laughing. I will drown you. You will suffer. Now aren't you enjoying yourself, curled on the cool floor under the fan! But I am obliged to inform you that it is your duty to get ready for death.

"Brute. Unaware of death. Not for nothing is it called an animal.

"You were ugly as a corpse at birth, and had the complexion of soot; podgy, like an obese, blind, sewer rat. But what matter! First, because it was Dinesh Ganguly's gift and, secondly, because the gift was lost accidentally, you were all the more valued on the pretext of your being orphaned. You too dined off the family board, just after Lakshmi Devi herself had dined. Like diminutive ghosts the five of you fed on milk and rice from out of her hands—seated on her lap, scrambling up her knees, perched on the table—it gave me the shudders to look at you. After she had raised the litter to adolescence, she gave away four to select homes; but you, being the only male among the five, were adopted by her—by that same Lakshmi Devi whom I had failed to persuade in all these eight years to bear me a child. You are two now; and for two years you were her companion in bed—for her the next best, I suppose, lacking Dinesh Ganguly.

"But then she could have taken you away too. On my side there is no surprise. I almost hoped for it, and it's good it happened this way. But, after such excesses, why did she leave you in the lurch? It's because of this: Dinesh Ganguly would not agree to let you share the bed. Mothers have deserted their children in the past—and you, after all, are no more than a dumb, unintelligent, short-living animal. Who can stop one who has been called!

"Poor you! To die at my hands unwittingly! Go and stuff yourself with food for the last time while I take a bath."

Bhupati put a sparkling white shirt on his bathed body. He was almost as healthy as Natu; the sweat of labor had vanished with ablution and the familiar gleam returned to his cheeks. Running a comb through his sparse hair, he slipped into his pocket a clean

kerchief and his wallet. Then he walked into the small dining room and opened the refrigerator.

Paresh was setting the washed tea-things in order; he asked: "Could I now take Natu out for a stroll?"

"I'll take him out myself," said Bhupati, sipping cold beer. "Feed him."

"He doesn't eat at this hour, sir. He is not ready for his food without his constitutional."

Natu was at hand. He lay curled up on the floor, his long head stretched out. Hearing himself mentioned, he lightly wagged his tail. "Food" was one of the few words he understood. One other mark of his being a little removed from the state of nature was that he never stopped in a room empty of people. And now he was shadowing Paresh because, next to Lakshmi Devi, it was to Paresh that he was most devoted.

Bhupati said: "There—he's wagging his tail. He is only waiting to be offered."

"I fear, sir, that it will anger the mistress."

Bhupati suppressed a shudder. "I am telling you to give him food. Have you cooked the meat for him separately?"

"It's always done that way, sir."

"Bring it in, right here. I want to watch him eat."

Paresh was a little surprised to see his master suddenly become so interested in Natu. He couldn't help being a little pleased, too. He brought in the food—rice and meat mixed together—on Natu's special plate.

The smell made Natu sit up. With a jerk he shook off sleep from his body.

"Stop. Don't eat." Paresh couldn't stifle the temptation to show his master how good and clever Natu was.

Natu pulled himself up in front of the plate, and from his open, heavily-breathing mouth, drop after drop of saliva fell on the floor. Looking sorrowfully at Bhupati, Natu whined humbly, in a voice as low as a rat's.

Bhupati asked: "Have you stewed it in turmeric?"

"Yes, sir."

"Free of salt?"



"Why, sir, didn't I learn all that from the mistress long ago! Why should I salt it? Don't you be concerned, sir."

"All right, then. Eat, Natu. Start eating."

A wave rose from the end of Natu's tail to the tip of his nose, but suddenly, noticing Paresh, he stopped short. Raising his face, the pupils of his widened eyes almost touching his forehead, he raised his right foreleg and began pawing Paresh.

Paresh smiled. "All right, all right. Go ahead." As soon as the word was given, Natu jumped on the food, and in three minutes the plate was licked clean.

"Pig!" Bhupati muttered. "My word was not enough; needed the go-ahead from Paresh too. Pig!" He lit a cigarette as he turned to Paresh. "See? What about his having no appetite before his stroll, eh?"

This old retainer, this cool-headed native of Midnapore, answered: "Mere animal, sir, eats whenever he gets. But our Natu is very well-behaved. He never eats unless he is given the word, nor does he ever touch the food not meant for him." Paresh picked up the plate and made for the kitchen.

Pouring the rest of the beer into the half-empty tumbler, Bhupati entered the sitting room and chose a comfortable seat. A bottle of beer with four chain-cigarettes in a quiet room at seven o'clock in the evening, without the compulsion to be nice if anybody dropped in—what could be better than this? What an escape! God bless Nehru for introducing divorce into Hindu marriages. Can't stand the sight of that Dinesh Ganguly. Never could. And that crowd—movie starlets some, businessmen others, some had cars and some fell for moonlight picnics in country houses. Haven't I suffered—yes, in this house, in this very room, they spent interminable hours, those familiars of Lakshmi Devi! Exhibited their teeth when they met me to keep up a show of good manners. And I too, outdoing them in courtesy, gave them the run of the house by slinking out. Many's the evening I spent on the bank of the Lakes, counting the stars in the sky. "How mean of you to slip out when people come to your house!" "No one comes to visit me—and the house, too, seems to be no longer mine." "All right, then. Have your house to yourself." The two lives drifted asunder, and yet, seemingly, it was all as

it had been before—and that was what was most repulsive.

Now the problem was how Natu should die. There he is—has sneaked in again. What is it? What do you want? Nosing for Lakshmi Devi, eh? As a neutral observer, I must say it was eminently her duty to have taken you along. But how could she? I don't suppose she would have any objection to mammying Dinesh Ganguly's offspring—and then supposing you gobble the child up in a fit of jealousy! Or, even before the brat can be spawned, if you make a pass at the would-be papa, himself? From her point of view, Lakshmi Devi has done the right thing; it wouldn't do to have you hang on to her now. Don't think she has forgotten you, however, for she has asked me to look after you. And that's why it hasn't cost me a moment's thought to decide. Yes. I am going to murder you."

"When will the mistress be back, sir?"

"Need to make any purchases?"

"There isn't any coal left, and—"

"Take this." With two fingers, Bhupati forked out a fiver from his breast-pocket. "For me, two packets of Capstan and matches. Buy whatever you need with the rest. Bring me the cigarettes first. And listen. For dinner, cook red lentil with ginger, and the meat must be well chillied and juicy. Take this away." Draining his glass, he handed it to Paresh and stood up. "Come, Natu, let's go for a walk," he said.

As soon as he was on the pavement, Natu bubbled over with excitement. In pedigree, he was rather low down on the scale; the measured, stately steps of the Alsatian were not for him. Moreover, he was exceptionally strong and continually wanting to run and to leap, to chase every cat he sighted and to challenge each dog he met to love or war. Bhupati had occasionally taken him out as a puppy; he had not guessed that the dog had grown so strong in a year's time. He had to clutch the leash tightly, he even used the whip; but for Natu it was difficult to restrain the excitement of being alive in this world, filled as it was with smells and curiosities. He had to investigate every wayside pile of rubbish, the lamp-posts were so inviting that he had to raise his leg even when he had no need to urinate. And after he had twice emptied his bowels of excess matter, his animal vitality began to simmer and bubble in that autumn eve-

ning with the first nip of winter in the air.

"Enjoy yourself to the full, for I am in no hurry. Of course I have to go slow, waiting for the crowds on the Lake grounds to thin and for the dark to deepen. Need a deserted spot, somewhere near the Lily Pool. The snag is that you swim well. But I have brought strong cords with me. I will tie your limbs and head neatly together; you will reach there in absolute silence. It will be a little painful for a few minutes, but what else could have been done? I don't know where one can get hold of poisons and drugs, and you know full well I do not have a gun.

"You can ask me: 'What have I done? Why kill me?' It is your right and your duty to ask as it is my duty to answer. Don't think I intend to revenge myself on Madame Lakshmi by killing you. Far from it. There can't be any thought at all of vengeance; there can't be any question of thinking ill of her. Far from doing me any harm, by deserting, she has done me a great service.

"The truth is, I want to begin anew. I would live quietly, no fuss, no bother. A good soul, that Paresh, but him, too, I'll sack. Just because he is an old hand, I wouldn't be able to stand him. Instead, I'll have a Nepalese boy who could iron my clothes and barbecue a few sticks of meat, and who wouldn't talk. And wouldn't it be troublesome if you were there! You don't agree now, but you would start howling for Lakshmi Devi at night, would set up such a din that I wouldn't be able to sleep, and our neighbor Janaki Babu would give me a piece of his mind the next day. Not only that—who knows for how many days and nights at a stretch you would cry? Many are the fantastic stories that go around about you dogs. It even seems that some starve themselves to death. Not for nothing do they call you dogs!

"Do think of me as seems fit to you, but I, my boy, just refuse to be bothered by keeping you. From today I'll be able to sleep and will not have to question myself while stretched on the bed, whether I have been injured or deceived. From today I sleep deeply. It is for this that you have to be removed. I have no cares now: I have a job, am strong, am good at my work; there is a neat little pile for me in the pension fund. If I want it, I can get a transfer to Bombay. If I pull a string or two, I can even get a transfer to London for two

years. I do not want to barter my independence for an insignificant thing like you.

"Want to go to live in some other home? Ask me to insert a notice in the papers? But would you be able to forget Lakshmi Devi so easily? So ungrateful! You were born in this house, it was here that you grew up on milk and rice and on soft beds, and after this would you wave your tail in delight in a strange household? If these are your secret thoughts, then mark this—I say it finally—you will not escape from me today, no, nor ever. You have to die.

"Or is it that you want me to leave you in distant Baranagore or Bagbazar? Know what will happen then? You have never ventured into the streets without an escort; you will be run over within half an hour. It would be easy if you die, but supposing you lose a leg? How would you then be able to survive in competition with old-timer street-dogs, you with only three legs—have you considered that? Each lane is the territory of a pack of old-timers, and if you, a novice and an innocent, try to infiltrate, they will cover you with wounds and sores. Reared as you are on saltless meat, you are hefty, I grant, but you would be no match for them in cunning. If you survive, you would sink to the underworld of the street-dog society, your body festured with sores, lame, ill-fed, skinny. No wifey-dear for you; under your nose, the Street Boss will lap up the left-overs from the shop-boys' plates, and when it rains you will be driven away from shelter on the laundry verandah by a growling pack. Why do you want to live on in such wretchedness? After all, how many more years do you want to live? Is it not better to stop after the two years you have lived in style? And besides, how can you expect me to have so much leisure as to run to Baranagore just to put you across? More: however far the place I set you loose, supposing you come back a couple of days or a week later with a stinking body and maybe a dirty disease or two? Haven't I heard stories of lost dogs turning up even after a month? No, I have made my decision: I am going to finish you off today, right now."

The swimming club was left behind and, leaving the turning towards the Buddhist Temple to his left, Bhupati stepped where a narrow strip of land divided two of the artificial lakes. Not till then was he able to light a cigarette, for he held the leash in one hand and

Natu's ball in the other, and wasn't it strenuous to hold the fiery animal in check! Bhupati sat down, stretching his legs on the green. He looked around. The days were now shorter; it already seemed as if it was gone far into the night and there were few loiterers left. Still, he would have to wait a little longer, maybe even for a long time.

Bringing his mouth near Bhupati's face, Natu barked. Bhupati did not respond, with either gesture or sound.

Natu moved a little further away, arching his back like a moon. He stretched his neck and tail and barked louder, a long tremolo: "Ow-ow-ow." His eyes glittered in the dark.

"What? Want to play? But I know not Lakshmi Devi's silly ways, I won't be able to shower you with kisses, can't pretend to be a ghost to give you the pleasurable creeps. I brought the ball for you to play with, but it is so dark—"

"Ow-ow!" Natu romped up and down before him and circled him, tripping lightly, dancer-fashion, and suddenly licked Bhupati's cheek.

"Tush!" Bhupati wiped his face with the back of his hand. "All this gives me the shudders. Becoming cheeky, are you? Move off, you, begone!"

"Ow-ow-ow-ow!"

Shoving Natu away, Bhupati stretched his full length on the green. And the dog, thinking that it was a new game, was overjoyed. Again and again he leaped across the prostrate body, tenderly, softly, biting his feet, trotting away, only to return galloping and jumping across Bhupati. Bhupati rolled the red wooden ball over the grass; Natu retrieved it and was back in a flash. Bhupati threw it away with a swifter jerk; in an instant the burnt sienna on Natu's back threw an echoing flash back to the electric lamp.

But after a few such passes the ball was lost; Natu could not find the spot where it fell. Nosing around clumps and bushes, Natu returned with funereal steps and stopped near Bhupati with his head hanging and his tail between his legs.

"Lost, is it? Good riddance. No more games. Let's be going now."

Bhupati jumped up and blew off tufts of grass and lethargy



from his body with a strong, deep breath. They were walking again, but Natu had lost his gaiety. Maybe he was disheartened because the ball was lost, or perhaps he was merely tired. Bhupati walked with a stern face, his steps purposeful, as if he were walking in measure to an ordered, stately rhythm. No glance to the right or left, his gaze was fixed on his goal. Natu was no longer straining nor tugging at the leash; he followed Bhupati like a meek sacrificial lamb.

Where, near the Lily Pool, the ancient cannon rests and the bank slopes down gently under a cluster of trees, there Bhupati stopped at the edge of the water. The shadow was deep, few the probing streaks of light, and no people in sight. Bhupati explored the vicinity. Yes, the benches were deserted, no one stretched on the grass, everyone gone home today even before nine. He lit a cigarette, but after a few puffs he flung it away and got down to work.

At first, Natu looked up in mild surprise, but later his excitement seemed to return. With the cord firmly in his mouth, he stood waiting. In a trice, Bhupati had his hind legs secured, and Natu, trying to move, tripped and fell. Securing the legs with a double knot, Bhupati looped the forepaws in. Such a strong animal, this Natu, but he was offering no resistance at all. Did he consider this to be play, too? "Let him, it's all in my favor, makes the task easier." Deftly, the mouth was closed, Bhupati passing the cord over the breast and abdomen; knotting the end of the loop, he passed it once again around the body of the dog and then stood up. He dried his perspiring temples with his handkerchief. Oof! It was a tough job, it was.

"After so many anxious thoughts, didn't it turn out to be pretty easy! As if he'd guessed what I was up to and had lent me a hand; after all, why try to resist the inevitable and needlessly make it more troublesome for me and more painful for himself? There he lies, inert, helpless as an overturned turtle, already as unheeding as the dead. Let's try the knots again—yes, perfect, taut and thick and strong. But is it hurting him?"

Bhupati lifted the dog, hugging him to his bosom, just as a mother lifts her child. Thus he went down to the water's edge. Once he had won some sort of a name in athletics, and of course he could fling the thing ten—why ten, even twenty—yards away. To pick up momentum, he swung the heap in his arms a couple of times. Before



the final swing, he stopped for a little second, and no sooner did he stop than a piercing cry rose upon the air. A wail it was, long and stupid and shrill. Once, twice, and three times the cry rose, rose and reverberated, and merged into the loneliness. With each cry, the sap drained out of Bhupati's muscles, the strength departed, and from his numb and tired and wearied arms the palpitating heap dropped onto the earth. And suddenly he found himself bending over Natu, loosening the knots. On the way home, he luckily found a taxi near the Marwari Club; as soon as they got in, Natu fell asleep on his lap.

But Natu seemed to go quite mad when the cab stopped at their doorstep. He ran breathlessly in, little heeding the bumps and the blocks, and made three steps at a time up the stairs without as much as glancing at Bhupati. Bhupati heard the click of the door of the flat being opened, and while climbing up he heard a woman's voice.

The first room as one entered the flat was the tiny dining room. The lights were on, the table laid for two, and beside it stood Lakshmi Devi. "Stood," however, is hardly the word, for in fact she was sprawling and swaying and struggling for breath under Natu's attack. Natu was now climbing up her body, the next moment he was hugging her with his forepaws, and then again suddenly licking her recklessly; it was impossible to resist the frenzy of slavery. Her hair tumbled down her back, her sari slipped, she tottered as Natu crashed against her, and, in between the gaps, flowed the stream of caressing names: "Natu! Nati! Natni mine! Nateshwar!"

Bhupati stopped short at the door as he saw this little scene. Suddenly, Lakshmi Devi noticed him. She drew herself up and, forcing a faint smile to her lips, said in a changed voice: "I—I—I have come back."

Bhupati rushed into the room. With his left hand he clutched Natu by the scruff of the neck; with his right, he picked up a knife from the table and slashed the dog's throat. Not a sound did the animal make, but Lakshmi Devi shrieked. The floor was covered with crimson blood.

"Hell! The flaming pits of hell! The sight of him is sin enough!"

Muttering these words through her clenched teeth, Lakshmi Devi rushed down the stairs.

# Bishu and Bishu's Sons

KARTAR SINGH DUGGAL

Translated by the author from the Punjabi

**B**ISHU was now an old man. His beard rolled up into a knot under his chin had greyed. His eyes had turned dim. Bishu no longer spent his time playing cards on the village platform under the shade of the pipal tree. Nor was he ever seen abusing his enemies near the village well. He did not even sit too long with his pedlar son lest he lost his temper with the customers.

In the evening Bishu went to the temple to listen to the readings of holy scriptures; in the morning he was there again before anyone else. He spent most of the day engaged in endless babytalk with his little grandson. When his wife, daughter or daughter-in-law came to the well, he drew buckets of water for their pitchers and was ever ready to do this service even for their companions. If he saw a stray stone or a thorn lying about in the lane, he picked and threw it aside. Almost every morning he scattered grains in his courtyard and watched the sparrows picking them up. His clothes were spotlessly clean, and his shoes always shining.

But Bishu's youth was notorious for activities of another sort. He had burglarized many a house and had been arrested, no one knew for certain, how many times. He had abducted the mother of his children from a village not far from his own. He was on unfriendliest terms with almost everybody in the village. People had still not forgotten the way he had robbed the village headman's daughter-in-law of her gold earrings. Hooking them up with a thick elastic string, he climbed up the berry tree in the courtyard. From there he pulled the string with a jerk so strong that her earlobes tore and the earrings were in Bishu's hands. At the screams of the girl, people sleeping around sprung up and rushed out. In the meanwhile Bishu quietly slipped down and mixed with the crowd, shouting and running about like everyone else for the "thief." If he had not been

caught selling the earrings to the village goldsmith, who would have ever known of his misdeed!

Again when Mother Ishro's only son died and she and everybody else were away at the cremation ground, Bishu had swept their unlocked house clean of everything to the last little grain.

Because of the several thefts he committed one after the other and particularly after the outrage he had wrought on the headman's daughter-in-law, the village-folk got Bishu's name on the list of "Goondas of Number Ten." After that he was universally called "Bishu of Number Ten."

Because of being thus listed Bishu was hauled up as soon as a theft was committed anywhere in the vicinity. Everyday in the evening he had to report himself to the village headman. If some policemen happened to be in the village, Bishu must wait upon them, look to their comforts, press their legs, massage their bodies, fetch clover for their animals—and receive their kicks and abuses. Of many a theft Bishu used to be absolutely innocent, but on being thrashed again and again he would perforce say "yes" and be imprisoned for months and years.

And thus living through all these insults, Bishu grew old. One of his sons had passed Matriculation. Both his daughters had shot up as high as a house-top, another son of his was also of marriageable age and there were two more, still very young.

His eldest son was refused employment everywhere because Bishu was a Goonda; his daughters could not be married because Bishu was a Goonda; his sons attracted no proposal because . . . And the marriage of his grown-up son was after all a joint responsibility of the whole village, his unmarried daughters were a common concern. After a lot of thinking the village elders agreed at last to get his name removed from the official list of bad characters. They argued that with his children now all grown up and his beard all grey, Bishu won't commit a theft or break a house!

Soon after Bishu's name was struck off the "list," his son got a job in the Morgah Oil Factory. An offer came for one of his daughters, soon followed by another for the second. In the factory his son's work was to count the candles and fill the boxes; others looked to the actual packing. Bishu's son, Rachhpal, was soon so adept at his

work that after a few days his hands automatically picked up the precise number of candles required for a box and he filled it in the twinkling of an eye. Work that took others a whole day to do, Rachhpal finished in an hour. After having finished his own work, Rachhpal helped others. His officers marvelled at his deftness and he got promotions one after the other and became the foreman before a year was out. Full two hundred rupees a month as salary besides many other facilities!

Bishu was now the father of a foreman; he put on clean clothes. Another of Bishu's son was a pedlar—he also eked out a good enough living. Bishu's total income exceeded that of many others in the village. A number of people approached him for his son, Rachhpal, and he finally accepted the daughter of a well-to-do family.

Bishu's full name was Bishan Singh.

Then came Bishu's daughter-in-law. Her parents had many rich connections in Bishu's village. The daughters and daughters-in-law of the village gentry were only too willing to associate with Bishu's daughter-in-law. Bishu now participated in the joys and sorrows of the village. He mediated and resolved many a dispute. When a new platform was raised in the Gurudwara, Bishu had a marble slab to his name: "Sardar Bishan Singh donated fifty rupees in the name of his father, Chowdhri Bhagwan Singh."

And people forgot that Bishu's father, "Bhagwana," had died a dog's death; that his head had been infested with worms; that his corpse was so repellant that no one felt like going near it, much less carrying it to the cremation ground.

Then a grandson was born to Bishu. Drums were beaten, flutes played upon, sweets distributed. The whole village turned out to felicitate Bishu and Bishu celebrated the occasion in a grand manner.

The headman of the village would occasionally come to Bishu for his advice—he was no longer sore about his daughter-in-law's torn earlobes. Villagers used to get kerosene oil at concession rates from the Morgah factory through his son's influence. Rachhpal had provided jobs to a number of village boys and people felt grateful to him. Rachhpal's cycle was the best in the village. At the Deewala Festival their house had the best illuminations with candles for

exceeding in number than at any other house.

Bishu's daughter-in-law had a new change of silk suit everyday. She was always laden with gold and silver. She got a new ornament made every month. Other women of the neighborhood marvelled at all this.

Bishu wanted to spend the rest of his life in pious atonement for his past sins. Now he had started learning a few elementary prayers also; he never refused alms to beggars; he always addressed his wife politely.

Bishu bought a buffalo, then a cow, and then the mare that even the "Zaildar" could not strike a bargain about. The village menials came to his house for whey. His wife cultivated good relations with the neighbors by generous gifts of curd and butter.

Bishu pulled down his mud house and raised a brick structure in its stead with a room on top for his foreman son and his wife. He purchased the next door house also and had it raised to the ground, for he wanted a broader courtyard.

Bishu's new house had many doors and windows and every night before sleeping he himself bolted and fastened each one of them. His son and daughter-in-law went to bed leaving the doors of the upper room open and he always shouted at them for this carelessness. Bishu could not forget that the house on their right was a deserted one and the lane on their left was also lonely.

More than once Bishu got up with a start while asleep disturbed by curious nightmares. Once his buffalo was scratching its horns against the wall. Bishu thought somebody was breaking into the house and in a panic he roused everybody.

Once in winter Bishu came back very late in night. Even then he started examining each window, fastened the bolts of every door, peeped into each nook and corner and when he entered the hush-room he found a thief lurking there. The moment he saw Bishu, the thief fell down at his feet. Bishu bound him hand and foot with the fellow's own turban and locked him up in that very room. He was now in a fix. Should he rouse others or not? Should he inform the headman or not? He recalled his own past. So many times he also had been bound just like that with his own turban by the police. How brutally did they thrash him—hanging him head down from



the ceiling, making him lie prostrate on the floor and whipping him at the back. Sometimes they didn't let him sleep for three nights on end; they used to burn red chillies under his nostrils. Lost in these reminiscences, Bishu went to sleep.

He got up at dawn while others in the house were still asleep. He went to the huskroom and, undoing the bonds of that fellow, gave him five little balls of *gur* and made him run away quietly.

Then as usual Bishu went out to the well, took his bath; as usual he went to the Gurudwara and rubbed his forehead on the holy ground; as usual he came home and said his prayers; as usual he went off to the fields to help people in their odd jobs.

And at midday, as usual, when Bishu returned home for meal he was astounded to see the police sitting in his courtyard and the entire household effects heaped nearby—cannisters full of kerosene oil, bucketsful of lead, tins of grease, gunnybags bursting with candles, trunks, boxes, cans, cooking pots, reams of Morgah paper, pencils, holders, nibs and ink tablets from Morgah, screws, nut-wrenches, hammers from Morgah factory, paints, varnish . . .

Bishu was taken aback. His son, Rachhpal, had been arrested as soon as he had reached the factory that morning. Somebody had reported against him, and on pressure from police he had blabbed out everything.

On the advice of lawyers, Bishu fought his son's defense to the last. The house had to be sold and the buffalo and the cow and the mare. Whatever savings he had were exhausted. And at last Bishu's son was sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment.

On her husband's arrest, Bishu's daughter-in-law had gone to her parents—for she could not show her face to the village people after that disgrace. And two days after Rachhpal was sentenced, she eloped with someone. And the bangles, necklace, earrings, anklets that Bishu's own wife had brought at her elopment, were also gone with the daughter-in-law.

During the law-suit sometimes Bishu went to Gurudwara and sometimes he could not. By and by he forgot all about it. The complications of the suit had made him irritable. He felt like losing his temper at every little thing—sometimes he restrained himself, sometimes he could not. The beggars were a poison to him—so many



times he half-pounced upon one standing at his door.

He now never sat under the pipal tree; he never went to the village well—the daughter-in-law had taken away the grandson along with her.

And the needs started pressing upon him; demands drove him desperate—poverty pinched him at every step. At home sometimes something was cooked, sometimes nothing.

The children squabbled among themselves, his wife continuously nagged him. They lived on thus—lived on till it became difficult to live like that.

Bishu was old. But yet quite energetic. His second son was at the peak of his youth and the next one was not less so. Bishu kept perpetually thinking! What should he do with his grown up sons? What should he do with his own time?

And then one day the village heard the news that Bishu and Bishu's sons had been caught while trying to break a house. All of them were sentenced to two and a half years' rigorous imprisonment. Bishu's name again went on to the list of "Goondas of Number Ten" and all his sons came to be regarded as those of "Number Nine."



# Tiny's Granny

ISMAT CHUGTAI

Translated from the Urdu by Ralph Russell

**G**OD KNOWS what her real name was. No one had ever called her by it. When she was a little snotty-nosed girl roaming about the alleys, people used to call her "Bafatan's kid." Then she was "Bashira's daughter-in-law," and then "Bismilla's mother"; and when Bismillah died in childbirth leaving Tiny an orphan, she became "Tiny's Granny" to her dying day.

There was no occupation which Tiny's Granny had not tried at some stage of her life. From the time she was old enough to hold her own cup she had started working at odd jobs in people's houses in return for her two meals a day and cast off clothes. Exactly what the words "odd jobs" mean, only those know who have been kept at them at an age when they ought to have been laughing and playing with other children. Anything from the uninteresting duty of shaking the baby's rattle to massaging the master's head comes under the category of "odd jobs." As she grew older she learnt to do a bit of cooking, and she spent some years of her life as a cook. But when her sight began to fail and she began to cook lizards in the lentils and knead flies into the bread, she had to retire. All she was fit for after that was gossiping and tale-bearing. But that also as a fair paying trade. In every *muhalla*<sup>1</sup> there is always some quarrel going on, and one who has the wit to carry information to the enemy camp can be sure of a hospitable reception. But it's a game that does not last. People began to call her tell-tale, and when she saw that there was no future there, she took up her last and most profitable profession: she became a polished and accomplished beggar.

At meal times Granny would dilate her nostrils to smell what was cooking, single out the smell she liked best and be set off on track until she reached the house it was coming from.

<sup>1</sup> A ward or quarter of a city.

"Lady, are you cooking aravi<sup>1</sup> with the meat?" she would ask with a disinterested air.

"No, Granny. The aravi you get these days doesn't get soft. I'm cooking potatoes with it."

"Potatoes! What a lovely smell! Bismillah's father, God rest him, used to love meat and potatoes." Every day it was the same thing: "Let's have meat and potatoes, and now" (she would heave a sigh), "I don't see meat and potatoes for months together." Then, suddenly getting anxious, "Lady, have you put any coriander leaf in the meat?"

"No, Granny. All our coriander was ruined. The confounded water carrier's dog got into the garden and rolled all over it."

"That's a pity. A bit of coriander leaf in with the meat and potatoes makes all the difference. Hakimji's<sup>2</sup> got any amount in his garden."

"That's no good to me, Granny. Yesterday his boy cut Shabban Mian's [Shabban Mian is the son of the lady speaking] kite string and I told him that if he showed his face again he'd better look out for himself."

"Good heavens, I shan't say it's for you." And Granny would gather her burqa<sup>3</sup> around her and be off with slippers clacking to Hakimji's. She'd get into the garden on the plea of wanting to sit in the sun, and then edge towards the coriander bed. Then she'd pluck a leaf and crush it between her finger and thumb and savour the pleasant smell and as soon as the Hakimji's daughter-in-law turned her back, Granny would make a grab. And obviously, when she had provided the coriander leaf, she could hardly be refused a bite to eat.

Granny was famed throughout the muhalla for her sleight of hand. You couldn't leave food and drink lying unwatched when Granny was about. She would pick the children's milk and drink it straight from the pan: two swallows and it would be gone. She'd put a little sugar in the palm of her hand and toss it straight into her

<sup>1</sup> A root vegetable.

<sup>2</sup> One who practices the traditional Arab (originally Greek) system of medicine.

<sup>3</sup> A loose flowing garment worn by Muslim women who observe purdah, completely enveloping them from head to foot. The eyes are covered either by a cloth mesh or a material thick enough to be seen through from the inside. Some have a veil which may be thrown back when not in use.

mouth. Or press a lump of gur<sup>1</sup> to her palate, and sit in the sun sucking it at her ease. She made good use of her waist band too. She would whip up an areca nut and tuck it in. Or stuff in a couple of chapatis,<sup>2</sup> half in and half out, but with her thick kurta<sup>3</sup> concealing them from view, and hobble away, groaning and grunting in her usual style. Everyone knew all about these things, but no one had the courage to say anything, firstly because her old hands were as quick as lightning, and moreover when in a tight corner she had no objection to swallowing whole whatever was in her mouth; and secondly, because if anyone expressed the slightest suspicion of her she made such a fuss that they soon thought better of it. She would swear her innocence by all that was sacred, and threaten to take an oath on the Holy Quran. And who would disgrace himself in the next world by directly inviting her to swear a false oath on the Quran?

Granny was not only a tale-bearer, thief, and cheat. She was also a first-rate liar. And her biggest lie was her burqa which she always wore.

At one time it had had a veil, but when one by one the old men of the muhalla died off, or their eyesight failed, Granny said goodbye to her veil. But you never saw her without the cap of her burqa, with its fashionably serrated pattern on her head, as though it were stuck to her skull, and though she might leave it open down the front (even when she was wearing a transparent kurta with no vest underneath) it would billow out behind her like a king's robe. This burqa was not simply for keeping her head modestly covered. She put it to every possible and impossible use. It served her as bedclothes: bundled up, it became a pillow. On the rare occasions when she bathed, she used it as a towel. At the five times of prayer, it was her prayer mat. When the local dogs bared their teeth at her, it became a serviceable shield for her protection. As the dog leapt at her calves it would find the voluminous folds of Granny's burqa hissing in its face. Granny was exceedingly fond of her burqa, and in her spare moments would sit and lament with the keenest regret over its

<sup>1</sup> Brown unrefined sugar, usually in cake form.

<sup>2</sup> Round flat cakes of unleavened bread.

<sup>3</sup> A shirt-like garment worn outside the trousers.

advancing old age. To forestall further wear and tear, she would patch it with any scrap of cloth that came her way, and she trembled at the very thought of the day when it would be no more. Where would she get eight yards of white cloth to make another one? She would be lucky if she could get as much together for her shroud.

Granny had no permanent headquarters. Like a soldier, she was always on the march—today in someone's verandah, tomorrow in someone else's back yard. Wherever she spied a suitable site she would pitch camp and, when they turned her out, would move on. With half her burqa laid out under her and the other half wrapped over her, she would lie down and take her ease.

But even more than she worried about her burqa, she worried about her only grand-daughter Tiny. Like a broody old hen, she would always have her safe under her sheltering wing, and never let her out of her sight. But a time came when Granny could no longer get about, and when the people of the muhalla had got wise to her ways—as soon as they heard the shuffle of her slippers approaching they sounded the alert and took up positions of defense: and then all Granny's broad hints and suggestions would fall on deaf ears. So there was nothing that Granny could do except put Tiny to her ancestral trade, doing odd jobs in people's houses. She thought about it for a long time, and then got her a job at the Deputy Sahib's for her food, clothing, and one and a half rupees a month. She was never far away though, and stuck to Tiny like a shadow. The moment Tiny was out of sight she would set up a hullabaloo.

But a pair of old hands cannot wipe out what is inscribed in a person's fate. It was midday. The deputy's wife had gone off to her brother's to discuss the possibility of marrying her son to his daughter. Granny was sitting at the edge of the garden taking a nap under the shade of a tree. The lord and master was taking his siesta in a room enclosed by water-cooled screens. And Tiny, who was supposed to be pulling the rope of the ceiling fan, was dozing with the rope in her hand. The fan stopped moving, the lord and master woke up, his animality was aroused, and Tiny's fate was sealed.

They say that to ward off the failing powers of old age the hakims and v aids,<sup>1</sup> besides all the medicines and ointments which

<sup>1</sup> Those who practice the ancient traditional (Indian) system of medicine.



they employ, also prescribe chicken broth—well, the nine-year-old Tiny was no more than a chicken herself.

When Tiny's Granny awoke from her nap, Tiny had disappeared. She searched the whole muhalla, but there was no sign of her anywhere. But when she returned tired out to her room at night, there was Tiny in a corner leaning up against the wall, staring about her with listless eyes like a wounded bird. Granny was almost too terrified to speak, but to conceal the weakness she felt she began swearing at Tiny. "You little whore, so this is where you've got to! And I've been all over the place looking for you until my poor old legs are all swollen. Just wait till I tell the Master. I'll get you thrashed within an inch of your life!"

But Tiny couldn't conceal what had happened to her for long, and when Granny found out, she beat her head and shrieked. When the woman next door was told, she clutched her head in horror. If the deputy's son had done it, then perhaps something might have been said. But the deputy himself . . . one of the leading men in the muhalla, grandfather to three grandchildren, a religious man who regularly said his five daily prayers and had only recently provided mats and water-vessels to the local mosque—how could anyone raise a voice against him?

So Granny, who was used to being at the mercy of others, swallowed her sorrow, applied warm cloths to Tiny's back, gave her sweets to comfort her, and bore her trouble as best she might. Tiny spent a day or two in bed, and then was up and about again. And in a few days she had forgotten all about it.

Not so the gentlewomen of the muhalla! They would send for her on the quiet and ask her all about it.

"No, Granny will smack me," Tiny would try to get out of it.

"Here take these bangles . . . Granny won't know anything about it." The eager ladies would coax her.

"What happened? How did it happen?" They would ask for all the details, and Tiny who was too young and innocent to understand entirely what it all meant, would tell them as well as she could and they would cover their faces and laugh delightedly.

Tiny might forget, but nature cannot. If you pluck a flower in the bud and make it bloom before it is ready, its petals fall and only



the stump is left. Who knows how many innocent petals Tiny's face had shed? It acquired a forward, brazen look, a look older than its years. Tiny did not grow from a child into girl, but at one leap became a woman, and not a fully-fashioned woman moulded by nature's skilled and practiced hands, but one like a figure on whom some giant with feet two yards long had trodden—squat, fat, puffy, like a clay toy which the potter had knelt on before it had hardened.

When a rag is all dirty and greasy, no one minds too much if someone wipes his nose on it. The boys would pinch her playfully in the open street, and give her sweets to eat. Tiny's eyes began to dance with an evil light . . . And now Granny no longer stuffed her with sweets: she beat her black and blue instead. But you can't shake the dust off a greasy cloth. Tiny was like a rubber ball: hit it and it comes bouncing back at you.

Within a few years Tiny's promiscuity had made her the pest of the whole muhalla. It was rumored that the Deputy Sahib and his son had quarreled over her . . . then that Rajva the palanquin-bearer had given the mulla a thorough thrashing . . . then that she had taken up regularly with the nephew of Siddiq the wrestler. Every day Tiny came near to losing her nose,<sup>1</sup> and there was fighting and brawling in the alleys.

The place became too hot to hold her. There was nowhere she could safely set foot anymore. Thanks to Tiny's youthful charms and Siddiq's nephew's youthful strength, life in the muhalla became intolerable. They say that in places like Delhi and Bombay there is an abundant demand for their kind of commodity. Perhaps the two of them migrated there. The day Tiny ran away, Granny had not the slightest suspicion of what was afoot. For several days the little wretch had been unusually quiet. She hadn't sworn at Granny, but had spent a lot of time sitting quietly on her own, staring into space.

"Come and get your dinner, Tiny," Granny would say.

"I'm not hungry, Granny."

"Tiny, it's getting late. Go to bed."

"I don't feel sleepy, Granny."

<sup>1</sup> Cutting off the nose was the traditional punishment inflicted on a loose woman. In this context, it would be the act of a jealous lover, punishing her for her promiscuity.

That night she began to massage Granny's feet for her. "Granny . . . Granny; just hear me recite the 'Subhanakallahumma,'<sup>1</sup> and see if I have got it right." Granny heard it: Tiny had it off pat.

"All right, dear. Off you go now. It's time you were asleep." And Granny turned over and tried to sleep.

A little later she could hear Tiny moving about in the yard.

"What the devil is she up to now?" she muttered. "What b—— has she brought home now? Little whore. She's got to use even the back yard now!" But when she peered down into the yard, Granny was filled with awe. Tiny was saying her *isha* prayer.<sup>2</sup> And in the morning she was gone.

People who return to this place from journeyings far afield sometimes bring news of her. One says that a great lord has made her his mistress and that she is living in fine style like a lady, with a carriage and any amount of gold. Another says she has seen her in the diamond market . . . others say she has been seen in Faras Road or in Sona Gachi.<sup>3</sup>

But Granny's story is that Tiny had had a sudden attack of cholera and was dead before anyone knew it.

After her period of mourning for Tiny, Granny's mind started to wander. People passing her in the street would tease her and make jokes at her expense.

"Granny, why don't you get married?" my sister would say.

Granny would get annoyed. "Who to? Your husband?"

"Why not marry the mullah? I tell you he is crazy about you. By God he is!"

Then the swearing would begin, and Granny's swearing was so novel and colorful that people could only stare aghast.

"That pimp! Just see what happens if I get hold of him! If I don't pull his beard out, you can call me what you like." But whenever she met the mullah at the corner of the street, then, believe it or not, she would go all shy.

Apart from the urchins of the *muhalla*, Granny's lifelong enemies were the monkeys—"the confounded, blasted monkeys."

<sup>1</sup> Part of the words recited at each of the five times of prayer.

<sup>2</sup> Last of the five daily prayers.

<sup>3</sup> Prostitutes' quarters in various big Indian cities.

They had been settled in the muhalla for generations and knew all about everyone who lived there. They knew that men were dangerous and children mischievous, but that women were only afraid of them. But then Granny too had spent all her life among them. She'd got hold of some child's catapult to frighten them with, and when she wound her burqa round her head like a great turban and pounced upon them with her catapult at the ready, the monkeys really did panic for a moment before returning to their usual attitude of indifference towards her.

Day in and day out, Granny and the monkeys used to fight over her bits and pieces of stale food. Whenever there was a wedding in the muhalla, or a funeral feast, or the celebrations that mark the fortieth day after childbirth, Granny would be there, gathering up the scraps left over as though she were under contract to do so. Where free food was being distributed she would contrive to come up for her share four times over. In this way she would pile up a regular stack of food, and then she would gaze at it regretfully, wishing that God had arranged her stomach like the camel's so that she could tuck away four days' supply. Why should He be so utterly haphazard? Why had He provided her with a machine for eating so defective that if she had more than two meals' supply at any one time, it simply couldn't cope with it? So what she used to do was to spread out the food to dry on bits of sacking and then put them in a pitcher. When she felt hungry she would take some out and crumble it up, add a dash of water and a pinch of chillies and salt, and there was a tasty mash all ready to eat. But during the summer and during the rains this recipe had often given her severe diarrhoea. So when her bits of food got stale and began to smell she would with the greatest reluctance sell them to people for whatever price she could get to feed to their dogs and goats. The trouble was that generally the stomachs of the dogs and the goats proved less brazen than Granny's and people would not take her dainties as a gift, let alone buy them. All this notwithstanding that these bits and pieces were dearer to Granny than life itself, that she put up with countless kicks and curses to get them, and that to dry them in the sun meant waging holy war against the whole monkey race. She would no sooner spread them out than the news would, as though by wireless, reach

the monkey tribes, and band upon band of them would come and take up their positions on the wall or frisk about on the tiles raising a din. They would pull out the straws from the thatch and chatter and scold the passers-by. Granny would take the field against them. Swathing her burqa round her head and taking her catapult in her hand, she would take her stand. The battle would rage all day, Granny scaring the monkeys off again and again. And when evening came she would gather up what was left after their depredations, and cursing them from the bottom of her heart, creep exhausted into her little room to sleep.

The monkeys must have acquired a personal grudge against Granny. How else can you explain the fact that they turned their backs on everything else the world had to offer and concentrated all their attacks on Granny's scraps of food? And how else can you explain the fact that a big rascally, red-behind monkey ran off with her pillow, which she loved more than her life? Once Tiny had gone, this pillow was the only thing left in the world that was near and dear to her. She fussed and worried over it as much as she did over her burqa. She was forever repairing its seams with stout stitches. Time and again she would sit herself down in some secluded corner and start playing with it as if it were a doll. She had none but the pillow now to tell all her troubles to and so lighten her burden. And the greater the love she felt for her pillow, the more stout stitches she would put into it to strengthen its seams.

And now see what trick Fate played on her. She was sitting leaning against the parapet with her burqa wrapped around her, picking the lice out of her waist-band, when suddenly a monkey flopped down, whipped up her pillow, and was off. You would have thought that someone had plucked Granny's heart out of her breast. She wept and screamed and carried on so much that the whole muhalla came flocking.

You know what monkeys are like. They wait until no one is looking and then run off with a glass or a katora,<sup>1</sup> go and sit on the parapet, and taking it in both hands start rubbing it against the wall. The person it belongs to stands there looking up and making coaxing noises, and holding out bread, or an onion: but the monkey takes

<sup>1</sup> A metal drinking bowl.

his time, and when he has had his bellyful of fun, throws the thing down and goes his own way. Granny poured out the whole contents of a pitcher, but the b—— monkey had set his heart on the pillow, and that was that. She did all she could to coax him, but his heart would not melt and he proceeded with the greatest enjoyment to peel the manifold coverings off the pillow as though he were peeling the successive skins off an onion—those same coverings over which Granny had pored with her weak and watering eyes, trying to hold them together with stitching. As every fresh cover came off, Granny's hysterical wailing grew louder. And now the last covering was off, and the monkey began bit by bit to throw down the contents . . . not cotton wadding but . . . Shabban's quilted jacket . . . Bannu the water carrier's waist-cloth . . . Hasina's bodice . . . the baggy trousers belonging to little Munni's doll . . . Rahmat's little dupatta<sup>1</sup> . . . and Khairati's knickers . . . Khairan's little boy's pistol . . . Munshiji's muffler . . . the sleeve (with cuff) of Ibbrahim's shirt . . . a piece of Siddiq's loin cloth . . . Amina's collyrium bottle and Batafan's kajal-box<sup>2</sup> . . . Sakina's box of tinsel clippings . . . the big bead of Mullan's rosary and Baqir Mian's prayer board . . . Bismilliah's dried navel string, the knob of turmeric in its satchel from Tiny's first birthday, some lucky grass, and a silver ring . . . and Bashir Khan's gilt medal conferred on him by the government for having returned safe and sound from the war.

But it was not these trinkets that interested the onlookers. What they had their eyes on was the precious stock of stolen goods which Granny had got together by years of raiding.

"Thief! . . . Swindler! . . . Old hag! . . . Turn the old devil out! . . . Hand her over to the police! Search her bedding: you might find a lot more stuff in it!" In short, they all came straight out with anything they felt like saying.

Granny's shrieking suddenly stopped. Her tears dried up, her head drooped, and she stood there stunned and speechless . . . She passed that night sitting on her haunches, her hands grasping her knees, rocking backwards and forwards, her body shaken by dry

<sup>1</sup> A piece of muslin or other fine material worn by women across the bosom, with the ends thrown over the shoulders.

<sup>2</sup> Lamp black, used as a cosmetic.



sobbing, lamenting and calling the names of now her mother and father, now her husband, now her daughter, Bismillah, and her granddaughter, Tiny. Every now and then, just for a moment, she would doze, then wake with a cry, as though ants were stinging an old sore. At times she would laugh and cry hysterically, at times talk to herself, then suddenly, for no reason, break into a smile. Then out of the darkness some old recollection would hurl its spear at her, and like a sick dog howling in a half human voice, she would rouse the whole muhalla with her cries. Two days passed in this way, and the people of the muhalla gradually began to feel sorry for what they had done. After all, no one had the slightest need of any of these things. They had disappeared years ago, and though there had been weeping and wailing over them at the time, they had long since been forgotten. It was just that they themselves were no millionaires, and sometimes on such occasions a mere straw weighs down upon you like a great beam. But the loss of these things had not killed them. Shabban's quilted jacket had long since lost any ability to grapple with the cold, and he couldn't stop himself growing up while he waited for it to be found. Hasina had long felt she was past the age for wearing a bodice. Of what use to Munni were her doll's baggy trousers? She had long passed the stage of playing with dolls and graduated to toy cooking pots. And none of the people of the muhalla were out for Granny's blood.

In olden days there lived a giant. This giant's life was in a big black bee. Across the seven seas in a cave there was a big chest, and in it another chest, and inside that was a little box, in which there was a big black bee. A brave prince came . . . and first he tore off the bee's legs and, by the power of the spell, one of the giant's legs broke. Then the prince broke another leg, and the giant's other leg broke. And then he crushed the bee, and the giant died.

Granny's life was in the pillow, and the monkey had torn the enchanted pillow with his teeth, and so thrust a red hot iron bar into Granny's heart.

There was no sorrow in the world, no humiliation, no disgrace, which Fate had not brought to Granny. When her husband died and her bangles were broken,<sup>1</sup> Granny had thought she had not

<sup>1</sup> A sign of widowhood.



many more days to live; when Bismilla was wrapped in her shroud, she felt certain that this was the last straw on the camel's back. And when Tiny brought disgrace upon her and ran away, Granny had thought that this was the death-blow.

From the day of her birth onwards, every conceivable illness had assailed her. Small pox had left its marks upon her face. Every year at some festival she would contract severe diarrhoea.

Her fingers were worn to the bone by years of cleaning up other people's filth, and she had scoured pots and pans until her hands were all pitted and marked. Some time every year she would fall down the stairs in the dark, take to bed for a day or two and then start dragging herself about again. In her last birth Granny surely must have been a dog-tick; that's why she was so hard to kill. It seemed as though death always gave her a wide berth. She'd wander about with her clothes hanging in tatters, but she would never accept the clothes of anyone who had died, nor even let them come into contact with her. The dead person might have hidden death in the seams to jump out and grab the delicately nurtured Granny. Who could have imagined that in the end it would be the monkeys who would settle her account? Early in the morning, when the water carrier came with his water skin, he saw that Granny was sitting on her haunches on the stairs. Her mouth was open and flies were crawling in the corners of her half-closed eyes.

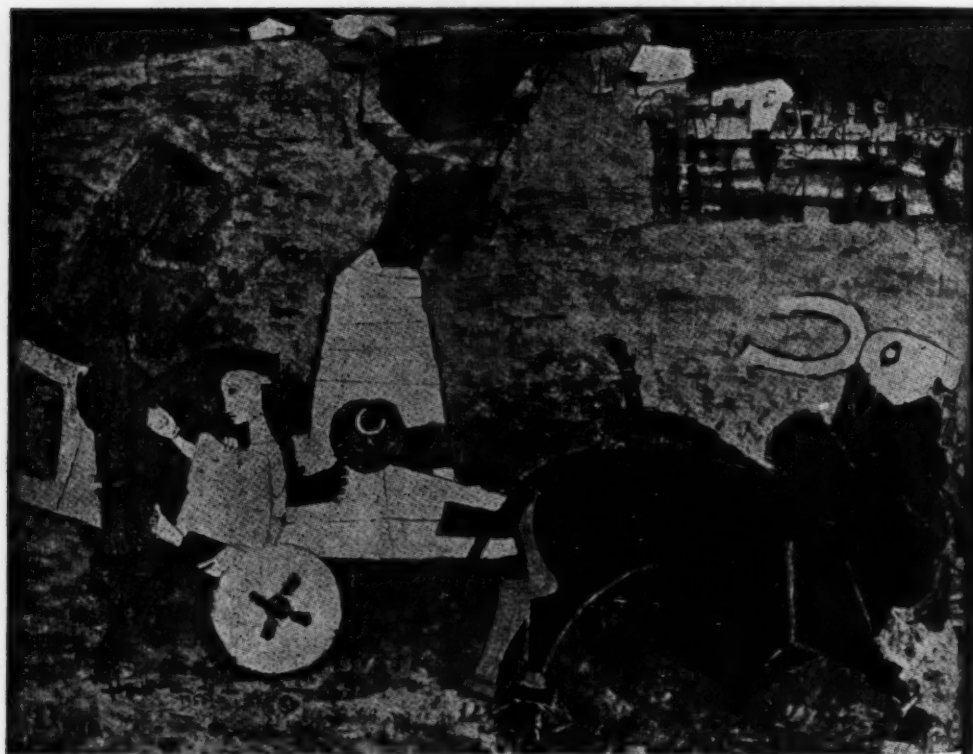
People had often seen Granny asleep just like this, and had feared she was dead. But Granny had always started up, cleared her throat and spat out the phlegm, and poured out a shower of abuse on the person who had disturbed her. But that day Granny remained sitting on her haunches on the stairs. Fixed in death, she showered continuous abuse upon the world. Her whole life through she had never known a moment's ease and wherever she had laid herself down there had been thorns. Granny was shrouded just as she was, squatting on her haunches. Her body had set fast, and no amount of pulling and tugging could straighten it.

On Judgment Day the trumpet sounded, and Granny woke with a start and got up coughing and clearing her throat, as though her ears had caught the sound of free food being doled out . . .

Cursing and swearing at the angels, she dragged herself somehow or other doubled up as she was over the Bridge of Sirat<sup>1</sup> and burst into the presence of God the All Powerful and All Kind . . . And God, beholding the degradation of humanity, bowed his head in shame and wept tears and those divine tears of blood fell upon Granny's rough grave, and bright red poppies sprang up there and began to dance in the breeze.

<sup>1</sup> In Muslim belief, a bridge thin as a hair and sharp as a sword, over which the true believer must pass to enter paradise.

YATRA, oil by M. F. Ha



# The Bride's Pyjamas

AKHTAR MOHI-UD-DIN

Translated from the Kashmiri by Motilal Raina

**N**ABIR SHALLA, the shawlmaker, was already three score and ten. He owned a ramshackle, two-windowed wooden house on the banks of the Jhelum. He sat in the verandah of his house engaged in his work, his thick glasses mounted tight on his nose, and crooned his favorite rhymes with a child-like lisp:

She brought me a goblet of wine,  
And took my breath away.

Nabir Shalla had passed most of his years sitting in the verandah and all this time had remembered only two songs which he recited in season and out. The second song:

Her skin is smooth as a ripened peach;  
Oh God! Keep her safe from the world's gaze.

From early childhood there had been a curious lisp in his speech. With the loss of teeth it had become more pronounced. The little swath of grey beard shone like snow flakes on his face as if small tufts of cotton scattered over the garment of Dame Shalla had been glued to his cheeks. In spite of a distinct tremor in his hands, he was able to make a living; indeed customers flocked to him for he was an expert at the job, many times better than most.

Nabir Shalla loved his ramshackle house and his wife, Khotan Didi, more than anything else in the world. Every evening she would gently press his back and caress away his day's fatigue, fetch him platefuls of hot rice and fill his hookah chilim.<sup>1</sup> Whenever he sat in the verandah crooning his rhymes and running his darning needle through a patch of rafal<sup>2</sup> cloth, she would sit in front of him, sifting

<sup>1</sup> A clay receptacle holding tobacco and live charcoal which is placed on the nozzle of the hookah.

<sup>2</sup> A warm cloth of soft fibre, usually used by the well-to-do.

cotton or spinning at her wheel. Nabid Shalla would make a sly comment, "You be 'prentice and I the master." Pricked by his remark Khotan Didi would retort, "Why should I be the 'prentice? Why not you?"

Khotan Didi had only one tooth left in the front of her upper jaw; and since her lower lip had caved in, this tooth hung out like a nail. Her face was wrinkled like a shrunken turnip and her hair matted like dirty white cloth. It was twenty years now since she had had her last, but in her life she had been confined about ten times. Unfortunately none of her children survived except her two daughters. Both of them were now settled in their homes and had relations of their own. In their wooden shack Nabir Shalla and his wife lived reasonably well without ever encountering a serious misfortune; they had run into debt to pay for their daughter's marriage but had gradually paid off the last penny. Khotan Didi had only one regret that none of her sons lived long enough. It was rumored that the Shallas possessed a large moneybag, worth a thousand or two. Heaven knew their real position; they lived off their meager earnings and that was all.

His thick glasses mounted on his nose, Nabir Shalla worked on a piece of a rafal cloth today crooning his favorite rhyme with the same child-like lisp:

She brought me a goblet of wine,  
And took my breath away.

By his side sat Khotan Didi at her spinning wheel humming in time to the music of the wheel. It had rained though not for long, yet the waters of the Jhelum were muddy and the heat was oppressive. He would have preferred not to work in this heat but then he was the sole earner. Whether he liked it or not, work he must. He had begun to realize that it was his own sweat and blood that went into the mending of others' clothes. He was all in a sweat and the rafal cloth on his bare knee gave him much trouble. But work he must, and in order to forget his discomfort he hummed his rhymes while he worked. He finished darning a patch and, in order to cut the cord, cast about in search of his scissors. But they were not to be found anywhere—at last he asked his wife, "Wherever have you put

the scissors?"

"I put them on the shelf," she replied.

"Bring them here. I need them."

Khotan Didi had rheumatism in her legs. She could not move about and found it difficult to stand on her legs. If she had her own way she would not move about at all for the rest of her life. Yet she could not turn down her husband's request. She moved in considerable pain and began searching for the scissors. She looked on the shelf, looked into the small tin box, but the scissors were nowhere to be found. Nabir Shalla grew impatient. He wanted to finish with his work and stretch his limbs and rest.

"Look sharp! Will you?" he cried. Khotan Didi pulled a bag from the shelf—it was full of worn out and children's garments and old clothes. "How very sad!" thought Khotan Didi, "The children all dead, but the clothes still intact." And one by one she remembered her children and the tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. Her flat breasts began to tingle. As she was throwing the old clothes about, she chanced upon a pair of red rose pyjamas. These were the pyjamas she had worn on her marriage day, long long ago, but they were still there—the only thing left of her dowry. Her heart throbbed and she plunged into the memories of her youth.

Khotan Didi felt abashed. She tried to keep it away from her husband, but the glaring red color of the garment screamed for attention. She blushed all over, her heart beating like that of a virgin and tongues of flame licking her entire body. She was the newly-wedded bride and Nabir Shalla her youthful groom. Images floated before her eyes of her godmother leaving her nuptial room and of Nabir Shalla approaching. For a moment Nabir Shalla appeared before her once more as a young man. She looked sideways at her husband, who gave a chuckle and hummed his usual melody: "Her skin is smooth as a ripened peach . . ." Nabir Shalla appeared really young in his pheran<sup>1</sup> and pashmina chaddar<sup>2</sup> while a turban of the finest brand of muslin crowned his head. Here was the groom fresh from the marriage ceremonial; here was the bride weaving a net of silly ideas and anticipating the advances of Nabir Shalla with trepidation.

<sup>1</sup> A loose upper garment.

<sup>2</sup> A kind of shawl.

With persuasive softness, Nabir Shalla wheedled her, "Why don't you put on those pyjamas?" Khotan Didi blushed again. She said nothing. Nabir Shalla continued, "Come on, why not?" He let his patch of cloth drop and came near his wife, speaking with feeling, "Why do you hesitate? Put on the pyjamas. You're a nice woman."

"You're a big fool," said his wife firmly.

"But why?" asked Nabir Shalla.

Khotan Didi sat quiet and motionless. It was not easy for her to make free movements of her body.

"All right," growled Nabir Shalla, and went down the stairs. Khotan Didi felt relieved. She gathered up the clothes and put them in a bundle, but she did have a last look at the rose red pyjamas before hiding them under a pile of rags and tossing the bundle into the shelf. She looked around for her husband. Wherever could he have gone, she reflected. But in her heart she felt a twinge of regret; why had he not forced her to wear the garment? She was sad.

It was some time before Nabir Shalla came back humming his rhymes. Khotan Didi now felt embarrassed and she blushed every time she remembered her bridal pyjamas; it was difficult for her to live down the memories of her youth, but Nabir Shalla was in a gay mood. He ascended the stairs singing softly. Now he stood before her holding a pound of mutton in his hands and handing it over to her, asked, "Did you put those pyjamas on?" Then after a pause, "What an obstinate woman you are!"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? At your age, behaving like a monkey," his wife remonstrated.

"Ashamed?" cried Shalla. "Aren't we man and wife?"

Khotan Didi tried to change the conversation. "What's this mutton for?" she asked.

"To cook, what else?"

Khotan Didi at once realized that she had a lone tooth and that Nabir Shalla was none to do justice to the mutton. But Nabir Shalla was no fool. He said, "Boil it until it's soft. It won't be too hard to chew. But why, you still haven't put those pyjamas on?" He tugged at her and pouted like a baby and would not let her go. At last she agreed that Nabir Shalla should leave her alone to change into the



red pair of pyjamas.

Nabir Shalla left the room and went down the stairs holding the pound of mutton in his hand. Khotan Didi shut and bolted the door. She untied the bundle quietly, passed the string through the pyjamas and changed into them. She was all aflutter. She forgot her rheumatism for the moment and went down, looking forward nervously to her encounter with her husband. Suppose someone saw them! Oh, my God! Whatever was he up to at this age? Oh, God, what a prospect! With her thoughts all a jumble, she entered the kitchen noiselessly.

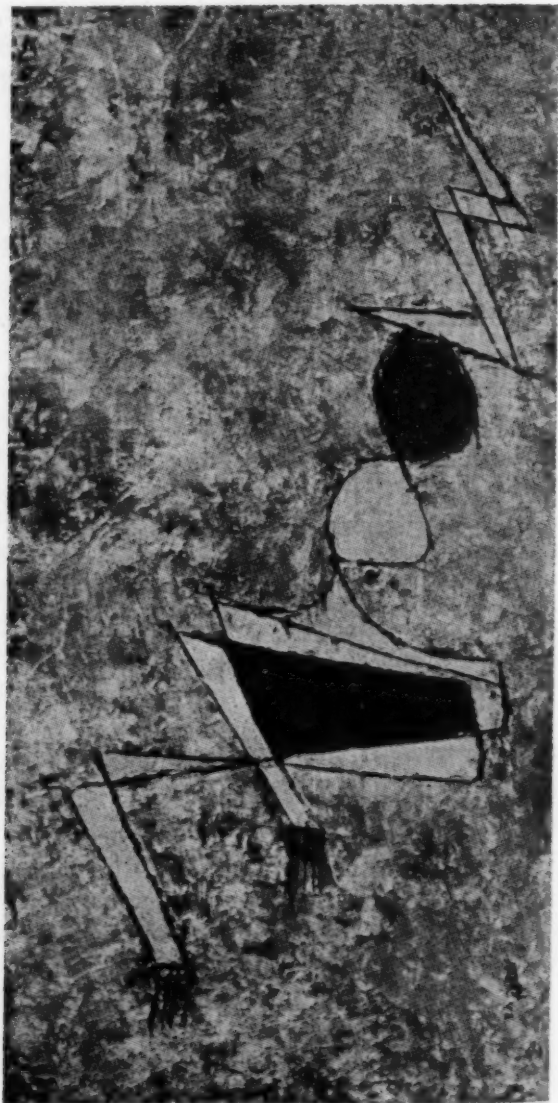
Nabir Shalla had mounted a pot on the hearth to boil the mutton and was sitting, now singing and now blowing into the fire. Khotan Didi would have preferred to sit down without her husband noticing her, but her foot caught into a mat string and down she came with a thud. Nabir Shalla gave a start. He saw Khotan Didi prostrated on the floor and uttered a long frightened cry. But in a moment Khotan Didi lifted her chin and smiled at her husband. Nabir Shalla held her arm and helped her to get up. "You aren't hurt, I hope," Nabir Shalla spoke anxiously. Khotan Didi shook her head in reply, now thoroughly abashed. "Well, get up then," Nabir Shalla pleaded. Again the same shake of the head in reply. He insisted that Khotan Didi should stand up in her pyjamas. She tried to resist but he was on the war path. He seized her and pulled her up like one possessed and began to tease her amorously like a newly-wed. Khotan Didi forgot that she was an aged woman and had grandchildren; and Nabir Shalla forgot that all his teeth had fallen out and that his son-in-law was already an old man. It was a marvellous sight to see Khotan Didi holding her ground and Nabir Shalla tugging at her sleeve, shoulder, or whatever he could lay his hands upon. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Somebody coughed. Nabir Shalla ran back to his place and sat as if nothing had happened. Khotan Didi was bathed in sweat. The newcomer was none other than their elder son-in-law who had been watching their amorous antics with a puckered brow.

"Salam-alaikum,"<sup>1</sup> said Nabir Shalla. "Please come in."

But the son-in-law retraced his steps without saying a word, his

<sup>1</sup> Muslim form of greeting.

flushed face like a red-hot flame. Khotan Didi was covered in shame like one caught red-handed. She looked guiltily at her husband, but he suddenly got up saying, "Why do you look so guilty? But why? Isn't this our home? And a man is a prince in his own home, isn't he?"



THE BIRD,  
oil by V. S. Gaitonde

# Chandan

UPENDRA NATH ASHK

Translated from the Hindi.

**S**H...AN, Sha...an, the milk boiled over the brim of the kettle and fell on the burning coals, giving out a pungent odour.

Chandan felt the odour in his nostrils, got startled, cast a glance towards the kettle and stretched out his hands to take it off the fire. It was red hot. His eyes searched for a rag or a piece of paper . . . Perhaps he could pour a handful of water on the boiling milk, but the water was dirty. (He had just washed his doughy hands in it.)

The burning milk-froth was filling the air with a pungent smell . . . And in the adjacent room, Chandan's master and his mistress were awake, talking in sweet, low, amorous whispers . . . Helpless Chandan thrust out his hands. In the fraction of a minute the red hot kettle, with its boiling milk, lay on the uneven floor of the kitchen.

He had burnt his finger-tips; a cry of "Si" escaped his lips.

Some of the milk had been spilt on the kitchen floor.

He washed it away with the same doughy, dirty water and shaking his hand violently ran towards the bathroom, placed his hands under the running water tap, jerked his head slightly and smiled out of the left corner of his lips—this was his wont—when-ever he committed a folly, he jerked his head and smiled. As his lower lip had been cut, every time he smiled, his dirty, yellow teeth were exposed and always his folly became all the more vivid before his mind's eye . . .

He had placed the kettle on the fire and was trying to pick up, with his ears on the keyhole, the soft and low whispers of his master and mistress. They were still in bed, though the sun was quite high up and Chandan had even finished kneading the flour for his master's luncheon. Chandan become so absorbed that he clean forgot about the kettle which he had put on the fire in obedience to his master's order for tea.

Before his marriage, Chandan's master had very regular habits—he would get up early in the morning, get himself massaged, take some exercise and then would go out for a walk.

But it was all so different now; he would be in bed with his newly wed wife till late in the day. From his bed he would order Chandan to bring tea and go on whispering to his wife. Chandan listened to these sweet amorous whispers with an evergrowing interest; he did not want his ears to miss even a single syllable. And as his ears were pinned to the door, he would forget all about the kitchen.

The milk had been boiling and swirling round in the vessel but Chandan's ears were pinned to the keyhole.

He distinctly heard his master saying: "My little darling . . . Your cheeks . . . they are so tempting . . . I cannot resist caressing them."

"I am fed up with your caresses," whispered the wife.

"But they are so lovely . . .

"Your slaps have made them burn."

"Now I will cool them" . . . And Chandan heard the almost inaudible sound of a kiss, as if a rose petal had fallen on a silk carpet. His imagination ran riot, he saw his master gluing his lips to the cheeks of his wife. His own body was on fire. His muscles twitched . . . He imagined himself in place of the master . . .

Chandan jerked his head again and smiling out of the left corner of his lips he left the bathroom. He went to the storeroom, rubbed a few drops of linseed oil on his dark and dirty burning hands, slowly walked to the kitchen and placed the tea kettle on the fire.

But in spite of burning his hand and jerking his head twice on his folly he again pinned his ears to the keyhole.

"Chandan!" his master shouted. Chandan started. Hurriedly, he prepared the toasts, put some tea in the pot, poured hot water over it, closed the lid, put it in the tray along with a packet of butter and toasts and carried the tray to the next room. His master was still in bed and though not embracing his wife, he lay very close to her. The quilt was only half drawn and his left hand was below her neckline.

"Place it here," said the master. And Chandan placed the tray on the table. The master eyed him and asked, "What is the matter with you? Where is the milk pot?"

"Just a moment, Sir," said Chandan and jerking his head and smiling out of the left corner of his lips, he ran to the kitchen. In a moment the milk pot was on the table.

But it was not the end. His master again thundered. The strainer was still missing. Chandan ran, brought it and stood waiting. He threw a stealthy glance at the mistress—the long black loose tresses fell on her round fair face, her lips still wet with kisses; her eyes tired, but still intoxicated; her night-gown trying to hide the reddened breasts bulging out of the thin fabric.

The master whispered sweetly, "Will you make tea, Jan?" The Jan (darling) turned her face away.

The master again repeated pleadingly: "Won't you have tea, Jan?"

And he slapped her softly and the darling rubbed her cheeks. "No," she replied to his request with a feigned resentment.

The master's hand supporting her neck tightened up a bit and she was in his lap.

"Please behave. Aren't you ashamed?" . . . She was conscious of the presence of the servant. The master's laughter rent the room and Chandan's heart beat faster. "Now get up, Jan, and make tea," entreated the master, his grip loosened. Don't be angry—so inviting are your cheeks . . . I feel like caressing them."

The Jan again turned her face away.

"Chandan, you pour out the tea," ordered the master. And with trembling hands Chandan obeyed.

Squeezing the mistress in his lap, the master put the cup to her lips.

Perhaps it was the word "Jan" or perhaps it was the way the master had drawn his wife closer that, when in the afternoon, Chandan finished his work and went to his cell, the figure of Zohra Jan—the famous Delhi prostitute—stood before his mind's eye.

It was indeed inexplicable, this rising of the figure of Zohra Jan from out of the depths of his childhood memories, almost as un-

awares as the boiling over of the milk . . . The same small figure, the same "full" soft body, the same big mischievous eyes, the same lips—red with betel juice—the same well-shaped hips, the same raised breasts and the same smile which rose, nobody knew, whether from her lips or her eyes.

He had been a child then. His parents were dead. He lived with his aunt, an ayah to the children of a merchant who ran a gramophone shop exactly opposite to Zohra Jan's tenement. The gramophones changed into silver rupees which found their way into her place.

Chandan frequently accompanied his brother and the merchant's son to Zohra's tenement. She loved the merchant's son and would give him sweets, the crumbs of which were shared by Chandan and his brother. Many a time it happened that while Chandan played with other children in the courtyard, the gramophone merchant himself would go and sit by the side of Zohra Jan. He would either take her into his arms or rest his head on her lap.

The wife of Chandan's present master resembled Zohra—the same stature, the same soft lips, the same prominent breasts, giving the feeling of bulging clouds, the same juicy cheeks and the same smiling eyes. It was perhaps on seeing her lying by his master's side that the memory of Zohra was revived in Chandan's mind.

In a flight of imagination, Chandan, acting the part of the gramophone merchant, went to Zohra's tenement and rested his head on her thighs. She lovingly caressed his hair. It made him forget his dirty feet, soiled up to his ankles; his legs dark and with a skin changed into a crust; his pair of shorts given to him once by his master—now black with dirt, all but tatters; his dark forehead which carried a most repulsive mark of injury; his lower lip which had a terrible cut showing his dirty yellow teeth and the hair on his head was short and dry and plain.

Chandan lay lost in thoughts, intoxicated with the soft caressing of Zohra's hands. While his hand still rested on Zohra's thighs, he turned on his side and wanted to say: "Zohra—my Jan! How sweet you are . . ." But something sharp stuck into his back; he realised that he lay only on an uneven floor and that his head rested not on Zohra's thighs, but on a wornout stinking pillow.



Chandan jerked his head, but did not smile. He sat up with his back to the wall; and as he sat there, many years of his life passed before him:

The gramophone merchant, after making a present of all his wealth at the altar of the tenement beauty, had left and gone to his maternal grandfather's village, lying in the lap of simplicity, filth and illiteracy somewhere in Central Punjab. Chandan's aunt had gone to her village in Alwar State and he had taken up a job with a friend of the gramophone merchant on three rupees a month. From now onwards his life was like a blanket which, if darned at one place, would be torn at another.

Chandan had heaved a sigh of great relief when he took up a job with this master, because he now felt that never during his service of twelve years had he served a master with a kinder heart and a sweeter temperament. But today it was his master's large-heartedness or sweet temperament alone which had become the cause of his misery . . . The master did not hesitate to make love to his wife in Chandan's presence, as though the servant were not a man but a mere lump of clay . . .

Chandan felt that he had been happy before his master got married. Never in those days had he felt this restlessness, this fire in his blood, these strained nerves, these sleepless nights. His sleep was so deep that nothing could disturb it. But ever since his master had married, his sleep had been uneasy. He saw strange dreams. Only the night before, he saw Kasani, the daughter of his former employer—with a high-above-the-ankle *lehnga* with a tight-fitting *bundi* with her head uncovered, with her breasts, like raw pears . . . exactly as she used to move about. She had come to him in his dream and slept with him.

How and whence she had come, he did not remember . . . He was awake . . . His body was hot . . . His nerves were strained . . . He was perspiring . . . He could not sleep any longer.

All this was beyond Chandan's understanding, and he shook his head at his foolishness. His master was still away at his office and his mistress slept fast in her room. He got up and made his way towards the quarters of his neighbour Rai Sahib's servant Jethu.

The *Chaitra* full moon was slowly rising from behind the banyan tree. Its rays illuminated the soft leaves of the young acacia . . . Chandan quietly came out of his room. The red flowers of the bougainvillia had taken on a blackish hue. On one side was the old Jacaranda. Its trunk had been cut in the previous year. But new branches laden with flowers and leaves had grown up and the clusters of these flowers looked like scattered bits of a cloud. The air was thick with the aroma of the lindens and *kakrondas*.

Although the people still slept inside their rooms, it was not very cold outside. Spring had come.

Chandan, in spite of himself, stood by the *gondani* tree; unconsciously he put a little fruit into his mouth. It was not ripe. It left an unpleasant taste in the mouth. For a while Chandan stood there in a state of indecision; then he went to the verandah and quietly opened the door leading to the drawing room, which was adjacent to the bedroom of his master and was usually kept open. It had two entrances—one was closed by Chandan's master from inside and the other by Chandan himself from outside.

Chandan softly opened the door. There was dim light in the bedroom, it diffused through the glass-panes as though some one had coated them with a haze of light. Lightly he walked on the rug and stood tiptoe by the door.

From the ceiling of the bedroom hung a red electric bulb. He opened his eyes wide and looked into the room. Soon he hastened out, his body was becoming hot and strained, his lips and throat dry . . . the boiling milk ran through his veins.

On tiptoe he left the room; bolted the door and came into the moonlight. In front of him stood the old sturdy Jacaranda. He felt like striking his wide chest against it to fell it.

In the lawn, at the foot of the bungalow the marble-water-fountain stood still. The plants, with yellow flowers surrounding it, were swaying with the breeze. Water-drops would slip from their wide leaves. The fragrant linden's smell pervaded the air. Chandan went to the fountain and turned the water tap on his head. The shower came . . . phurr . . . phurr . . . and he asked himself why he had gone to Jethu's cell which was the rendezvous of all the servants in the neighbourhood at noon time. Here they played *chakri* or gro-

tesquely mimicked their masters and mistresses. Off-and-on Jethu would bring a gramophone with a disc or two from his uncle's, who had bought it in a second-hand dealer's clearing-sale. Its music resembled the squeal of an anaemic child suffering from diarrhoea. But they all listened raptly to "Oh the fair one, on your fair cheeks . . ." or "my eyes met yours and yours met mine—How divine" or "cross the street and come to me." Recently Jethu had brought a record of Indian Charlie. It was played every afternoon and they listened with rapt attention:

"Your sidelong glance has slain me . . .

One, two, three . . .

Your sidelong glance has slain me . . ."

Chandan had never gone there to listen to the records. He had no time. Early in the morning his master would wake him, and Chandan would massage his body with linseed oil, and prepare tea and when his master left for office, he would cook meals, which he took to office and then would take a bath, eat and go to sleep—a sleep so sound that he would not get up till sunset, when often his master would kick him to make him get up. But this afternoon he could not sleep and he had gone to Jethu's room and listened to tales which made him lose even his night's sleep.

The shower bath had made him shiver. He asked himself, "Have I got fever? It is not good to stand under water in this changing weather. I might catch a cold and die."

Chandan jerked his head, but he did not smile. Leaving the water tap running, he went back to his cell and dropped asleep.

But before long he awoke. He felt his head was heavy. A fever had gripped his body. His eyes were burning. He had just seen a dream. Bunches of pears were revolving round his head and he was in a desolate house trying to catch them. "Do not break my toys," came the cry and as he looked up he found it was Kasani. He heard her saying: "Do not break my toys; do not pluck my pears . . ."

Chandan got up a mad man. Jethu's words still rang in his ears. He put on his *kurta*, took his old dirty purse out of the dirty earthenware, put it into his pocket, bolted the door and went out of the house.

Out in the parade ground the moonlight spread like a canopy as if supported by the trees at the periphery. Beyond those trees were the municipal electric lights obstructed from sight by their thick foliage, and it looked as if there was a huge bonfire beyond those trees.

Chandan took to Queen Mary Road. From the right came whiffs of breeze, bearing an aroma of the night. The net of light and darkness covered the road beneath the trees.

He stopped at the Tis Hazari four-way junction, maybe for a tram. But it was long past eleven o'clock. The road at this hour was unfrequented. An openroofed cart full of garbage and night-soil passed by him, spreading its evil smell. Chandan's head spun; he ran towards the bridge, where he saw that the little island on which the policeman stood to direct the traffic during the day had been broken by some angry driver who had wreaked his vengeance on the innocent platform for the policeman's surly remarks.

There was absolute silence on the bridge. The moon overhead shone brilliantly. Below there was the network of railway lines shining in depth and darkness. Further ahead in the distance flicked the red and green signal lamps.

For a while Chandan stood with his head resting on the parapet of the bridge, gazing at the serpent-like railway lines and the flickering signals. Then he strode forward.

There was no sign of life on the road. The shops on both sides were closed. Here and there on the footpath slept a few petty shopkeepers, covering themselves with dirty greasy quilts. In the moonlight, their fair limbs showed out of their dirty *dhotis*. On the left side of the road, near Teliwada, stood a broken tonga and a few empty garbage carts; and beyond was the wall, from the other side of which one could hear the noise of the last running trains. Outside the shops on the right side lay loads of bamboos, cots and empty packing boxes.

Lost in thought, Chandan reached the Qutab road-crossing. All shops in the Sadar Bazar, except that of a confectioner at the street corner, had closed. Chandan's excitement by this time had cooled off; only a mild desire was left in him. He took half a seer of hot milk and as if with new desires awakened within him, went

ahead. Here too most of the shops on both sides of the road were closed. On the left there was the Masha-Allah Hotel, where some one was eating his late night grub. Here and there a betel-seller's shop was open. A labourer, who could not perhaps find time during the day, was getting a hair-cut.

At the turning of the Kath Bazar, Chandan stopped for a while. A solitary tonga driver was still loitering about near the tonga shed. Overhead the moon shone in all its brilliance. Smoke and dust mingled with the moonlight.

Chandan entered the Kath Bazar, looked up with curiosity towards a tenement where sat a young whore facing a gas lamp. His desires revived. But there were several people in front of the balcony, and before so many people and in so glaring a light he felt shy to strike a bargain. He looked at the row of the tenements on the ground floor. Every one of them had a lamp hanging before it, facing which sat or stood a woman.

Now and then a woman would close the door and follow a man with a lamp in her hand into the space behind the dirty curtains.

Chandan felt that his desires were sinking again. He stepped forward, sat on an iron chair placed in the middle of the road and by the side of which lay a table with multi-coloured bottles and where sat one or two masseurs.

"Shampoo," they shouted. "Shampoo, Shampoo."

Chandan, in spite of himself, got shampooed at the adjoining table. Next to him was the verandah with the long row of one room tenements. Lest they should get tired, they were holding ropes fixed to the ceiling to support them, or perhaps it was a device to show the contours, which were fast losing their firmness, to advantage.

Leaving behind the crossing, he entered a by-lane. Here were fewer people and the light was also not so strong. He crossed and recrossed the by-lane. He did not know how to negotiate the terms. He could not even look into their faces. Indeed at the very idea, his heart pounded furiously. He thought of returning to his house, and then wished he had come here in Jethu's company. He thought he would cross the street to its other end. And still he did not want to return, having come so far.

Just then a fat blubbery woman, seated in a rather dark corner in front of one of the tenements solved his problem. By her side lay two young girls on a *duree*.

"Come," said the woman rather affectionately.

And Chandan went close to her. "What are you thinking about? Just twelve annas," she whispered, and pointed towards the woman sitting on a chair outside the room dressed in a black sleeveless blouse . . . The hair in her armpits were visible; her breasts were like overripe melons!

But Chandan looked with wistful eyes at the young girl half sitting and half lying by the side of the woman. She wore a little *nose-ring*.

The fat woman understood.

"She is too young," she said, "She is yet unknown to all this."

Raw pears flitted across Chandan's mind . . . Then Kasani and again raw pears . . .

"She will cost two rupees."

Chandan kept mum, although he wanted to say; "Two rupees is a bit too much."

And the fat woman said: "All right one rupee and eight annas. She is yet so young—hasn't even got her *nose-ring* off."

Milk in Chandan's veins reached the boiling point; his whole body became hot. The next moment he was on the other side of the dirty curtain, followed by the fat woman leading the young girl with a lamp in her hand . . .

A week later . . . Chandan stood with his bag and baggage in the porch of the bungalow. Inside the room, the master was instructing the wife: "I will despatch the doctor immediately. Get the whole house disinfected. The wretch has been everywhere in the house."

And poor helpless Chandan stood thinking: "But she was only thirteen. Even her *nose-ring* had not been removed."



# Riot

KHUSHWANT SINGH

THE TOWN LAY ETHERIZED under the fresh spring twilight. The shops were closed and house doors barred from the inside. Street lamps dimly lit the deserted roads. Only a few policemen walked about with steel helmets on their heads and rifles slung behind their backs. The sound of their hobnailed boots was all that broke the stillness of the town.

The twilight sank into darkness. A crescent moon lit the quiet streets. A soft breeze blew bits of newspaper from the pavements onto the road and back again. It was cooled and smelled of the freshness of spring. Some dogs emerged from a dark lane and gathered round a lamppost. A couple of policemen strolled past them smiling. One of them mumbled something vulgar. The other pretended to pick up a stone and hurl it at the dogs. The dogs ran down the street in the opposite direction and resumed their courtship at a safer distance.

Rani was a pariah bitch whose litter populated the lanes and by-lanes of the town. She was a thin, scraggy specimen, typical of the pariahs of the town. Her white coat was mangy, showing patches of raw flesh. Her dried up udders hung loosely from her ribs. Her tail was always tucked between her hind legs and she slunk about in fear and abject servility.

Rani would have died of starvation with her first litter of eight had it not been for the generosity of the Hindu shopkeeper, Ram Jawaya, in the corner of whose courtyard she had unloaded her womb. The shopkeeper's family fed her and played with her pups till they were old enough to run about the streets and steal food for themselves. The shopkeeper's generosity had put Rani in the habit of sponging. Every year when spring came, she would find excuse to loiter around the stall of Ramzan, the Moslem greengrocer. Beneath the wooden platform on which groceries were displayed lived the big, burly Moti. Early autumn, Rani presented the shopkeeper's

household with half-a-dozen or more of Moti's offspring.

Moti was a cross between a Newfoundland and a spaniel. His shaggy coat and sullen look was Ramzan's pride. Ramzan had lopped off Moti's tail and ears. He fed him till Moti grew big and strong and became the master of the town's canine population. Rani had many rivals. But year after year, with the advent of spring, Rani's fancy lightly turned to thoughts of Moti and she sauntered across to Ramzan's stall.

This time spring had come but the town was paralyzed with fear of communal riots and curfews. In the daytime people hung about the street corners in groups of tens and twenties, talking in whispers. No shops opened and long before curfew hour the streets were deserted, with only pariah dogs and policemen about.

Tonight even Moti was missing. In fact, ever since the curfew Ramzan had kept him indoors tied to a cot. He was far more useful guarding Ramzan's house than loitering about the streets. Rani came to Ramzan's stall and sniffed around. Moti could not have been there for some days. She was disappointed. But spring came only once a year—and hardly ever did it come at a time when one could have the city to oneself with no curious children looking on—and no scandalised parents hurling stones at her. So Rani gave up Moti and ambled down the road toward Ram Jawaya's house. A train of suitors followed her.

Rani faced her many suitors in front of Ram Jawaya's doorstep. They snarled and snapped and fought with each other. Rani stood impassively, waiting for the decision. In a few minutes a lanky black dog, one of Rani's own progeny, won the honours. The others slunk away.

In Ramzan's house, Moti sat pensively eyeing his master from underneath his charpoy. For some days the spring air had made him restive. He heard the snarling in the street and smelled Rani in the air. But Ramzan would not let him go. He tugged at the rope—then gave it up and began to whine. Ramzan's heavy hand struck him. A little later he began to whine again. Ramzan had had several sleepless nights watching and was heavy with sleep. He began to snore. Moti whined louder and then sent up a pitiful howl to his unfaithful mistress. He tugged and strained at the leash and began

to bark. Ramzan got up angrily from his charpoy to beat him. Moti made a dash toward the door dragging the lightened string cot behind him. He nosed open the door and rushed out. The charpoy stuck in the doorway and the rope tightened around his neck. He made a savage wrench, the rope gave way, and he leapt across the road. Ramzan ran back to his room, slipped a knife under his shirt, and went after Moti.

Outside Ram Jawaya's house, the illicit liaison of Rani and the black pariah was consummated. Suddenly the burly form of Moti came into view. With an angry growl Moti leapt at Rani's lover. Other dogs joined the melee, tearing and snapping wildly.

Ram Jawaya had also spent several sleepless nights keeping watch and yelling back war cries to the Moslems. At last fatigue and sleep overcame his newly-acquired martial spirit. He slept soundly with a heap of stones under his charpoy and an imposing array of soda-water bottles filled with acid close at hand. The noise outside woke him. The shopkeeper picked up a big stone and opened the door. With a loud oath he sent the missile flying at the dogs. Suddenly a human being emerged from the corner and the stone caught him squarely in the solar plexis.

The stone did not cause much damage to Ramzan, but the suddenness of the assault took him aback. He yelled "Murder!" and produced his knife from under his shirt. The shopkeeper and the grocer eyed each other for a brief moment and then ran back to their houses shouting. The petrified town came to life. There was more shouting. The drum at the Sikh temple beat a loud tattoo—the air was rent with war cries.

Men emerged from their houses making hasty enquiries. A Moslem or a Hindu, it was said, has been attacked. Someone had been kidnapped and was being butchered. A party of goondas were going to attack, but the dogs had started barking. They had actually assaulted a woman and killed her children. There must be resistance. There was. Groups of fives joined others of ten. Tens joined twenties till a few hundred, armed with knives, spears, hatchets, and kerosene oil cans proceeded to Ram Jawaya's house. They were met with a fusilade of stones, soda-water bottles, and acid. They hit back blindly. Tins of kerosene oil were emptied indiscriminately and lighted.

Flames shot up in the sky enveloping Ram Jawaya's home and entire neighbourhood, Hindu, Moslem and Sikh alike.

The police rushed to the scene and opened fire. Fire engines clanged their way in and sent jets of water flying into the sky. But fires had been started in other parts of the town and there were not enough fire engines to go round.

All night and all the next day the fire burnt—and houses fell and people were killed. Ram Jawaya's home was burnt and he barely escaped with his life. For several days smoke rose from the ruins. What had once been a busy town was a heap of charred masonry.

Some months later when peace was restored, Ram Jawaya came to inspect the site of his old home. It was all in shambles with the bricks lying in a mountainous pile. In the corner of what had once been his courtyard there was a little clearing. There lay Rani with her litter nuzzling into her dried udders. Beside her stood Moti guarding his bastard brood.



KASHMIR LOTUSES,  
woodcut by Chittaprosad

# The Carpet

KRISHAN CHANDER

Translated from the Urdu by Jai Ratan

THIS CARPET is now old. But two years ago, when I bought it from a shop in Hazratganj, it looked alarmingly innocent: soft texture, medley of colours, a guileless smile. Not now, but two years ago. Now poison has entered its threadbare fabric, its colour has faded, and tears peep through its smile. Its surface is uneven like the skin of a leper. Now the carpet, a pessimist, laughs a hollow bitter laugh, and breathes heavily as if it has gathered the dirt of the whole world in its lap.

This carpet is nine feet by five feet, no bigger than an average-sized bedstead. Its edges, almond-brown, are one and a half inches deep. The real carpet, in a way, starts from here, with a red that is spread across its entire width in a two-foot border. In other words, it starts with a five-by-two rectangle, a red lake, rippling into many nuances of red-deep scarlet, purple, rose-red and still another red, the colour of impure blood. While lying, I rest my head on this part of the carpet and every time I lie down I feel as if leeches are clinging to my head, sucking dirty blood.

Below this red rectangle are five more rectangles in different colours, spread across the width of the carpet, one after the other, so that the carpet actually terminates with the fifth rectangle. Exactly below the blood-red are three smaller rectangles, the first, like a chess-board, of black and white, the second white and blue, the third blue-black and khaki-brown. From a distance, these chess-board squares look like pock-marks, and for that matter even if you look at them from close quarters their beauty is in no way enhanced. On the contrary, they look soiled and musty, like second-hand warm coats hung on the line for auction. If the first rectangle is a lake of blood, the other three together create an illusion of a lake of pus. In these lakes rest my shoulders, heart and lungs encased in the box ribs.

The fourth rectangle is yellowish; the fifth, green. It is green, not like the verdure of spring, but like the water in the depths of the sea. It is a dangerous colour; it reminds one of sharks, of the hysterical shrieks of drowning sailors, of the roar of crashing waves which send shudders through one's heart. Yellow is, of course, always sinister. The yellow of the carpet is not the yellow of saffron or basant; it is the dull yellow of dust, wan like the complexion of a consumptive, pale like the colour of first sin inter-mixed with a pang of remorse. I feel as if this rectangle again and again cries out: What am I, why do I exist?

In the right-hand corner, near where I rest my head, are ten parallel lines in yellow and blue; and where I rest my feet are eleven lines, in yellow and ochre. In the middle of the carpet again, six lines in white and red; and right in their centre is a deep dark spot . . . When I lie on the carpet I feel as if I am shackled to these lines with chain-hooks, as if I am hanging on a cross with a nail piercing my heart. All around me is dirty blood, and pus and green sea infested with sharks and sea monsters. Did Christ suffer the agony I do when I stretch myself on this carpet? But it is the nature of man to wallow in agony. That's why I cannot bring myself to part with this carpet or have the courage to buy a new one. This is the only carpet that I possess and I have a feeling this carpet will remain with me till the end of my days.

In fact, a lady wanted to buy it. In a shop in Hazratganj she had it unrolled for inspection when it caught my fancy. Unable to decide, she began to examine a silk blouse-piece.

I told the Manager I was interested in the carpet.

He looked at the lady. "Miss Roopvati—perhaps she has already selected it. I'll ask her."

"It's not a bad carpet," Roopvati said.

"How do you mean, not bad?" I said, flaring up. "It's the only carpet of its kind in the world. Even Dante's imagination could not have conceived of such a pattern. It is beautiful like the sloppy hospital bucket, soulful like a disease. This river of pus and fire reminds me of the journey of Hatimtai, of the ancient Italian art masterpieces. It's more than a carpet; it is history, the quintessence of man."

She smiled. Her teeth were white, dazzlingly white but uneven



and close. But still her smile was captivating.

"Have you been to Italy?" she asked.

"I haven't been beyond Hazratganj," I replied. "I spent all my life in this godforsaken hole. There's the betel shop, and over there, across the road, the Coffee House."

The Manager thought it time for formal introductions. "He's an artist," he said, "draws pictures. This is Miss Roopvati, the new principal of the college. Just returned from England . . ."

"You may take this carpet," she said. "It's not quite the thing I would like to go in for."

"I'm grateful," I said as I paid for it. "Would you care to have coffee with me? Please. Let's go to the Coffee House . . . If you don't mind . . . I mean . . ."

"Thanks a lot. But first, the silk blouse." She smiled.

Her smile was pleasing. There was a touch of pallor on her intelligent oval face. The faint red of her lips cast a soft glow on her sandalwood complexion.

She bought a blouse piece. As she made a move towards the door, she stumbled. I held out my arm to her. "Why," I asked, "do you always walk with a limp?"

"Of course not," she replied. I looked closely. Her foot was bandaged.

"Injured?"

"I had an ingrowing toenail. And that fool of a ship's surgeon . . ."

She adjusted the palla of her sari over the head and when she bent I saw two pale roses tucked on the right side of her hair near the nape. When she bent again the kum-kum on her forehead glowed. Why did I never find kum-kum so shockingly beautiful before?

In the Coffee House it dawned on me that she was beautiful. Perhaps the Coffee House had something to do with it, for the lights there are so cunningly arranged that men look uglier and women lovelier than they actually are. Moreover . . . Anyway, she must have been really beautiful, otherwise men would not have turned to look at her again and again and women would not have cast such fierce glances at her. And why did the waiters arrive so promptly at our

table?

She smiled. "Some warm milk and hot water. In separate cups."

"Hot water?" the bearer repeated haltingly.

"Yes. A little will do." She smiled again.

The waiter melted. I saw him melting. A faint smile came to his lips and it ran down melting his whole body.

"And some egg sandwiches."

The waiter returned: there were no sandwiches left.

"Not even a few?" Her large, innocent, wounded eyes grew still larger with helplessness. "Not even one plate?"

She got her sandwiches.

"Let me pay."

"No, it's a man's privilege."

"An outmoded custom." She smiled and paid the bill.

My servant did not like the carpet. In those days a high-strung poet was my guest. He wrote *vers-libre*, drank copiously and said *namaz* five times a day. He too did not like the carpet. When I asked him to explain, he said "Huh" and lapsed into silence. His talk was in inverse proportion to the length of his poems.

"What do you mean by 'Huh'?" I said, peeved. "Just consider the harmony of its colours."

Roop looked at him intently. She burst into laughter.

She requested the stale, dehydrated poet to read one of his new poems to her. "Do you know that Spender and Auden are now writing in support of slavery?"

"Huh." He stroked his beard and growled.

"How do you know?" I asked Roop. "Did they read their poems to you?"

"No, Joseph told me."

"Joseph?"

"Joseph Brown. Haven't you heard of him? He's the rage in Oxford these days. His books have not reached India yet. I call him Joe. In London he fell in love with me."

She smiled—a curious smile of brazen shyness. Her kum-kum glowed like a ruby.

"You have made many conquests in your life," I said.

"No." She sighed.

"Huh," the poet said.

Roop smiled. "Your friend is very talkative," she said to me. "Listen, I'll read you a poem."

Every time she came up with something new. "You are a poet too?"

"No. My mother wrote the poem."

"Wait. Let me spread the carpet."

Roop started reciting. It was a Bengali song, doleful like the burnt offering of the night of separation. Lovely as a lighted candle. Her voice trembled like a flame, it was intoxicating like wine . . . Bengali girls, row after row of them, going to the ghat, pitchers under their arms. The green waves of the sea rippled. Lord Shiva played on the drum. Parvati broke into a dance, and flakes of snow floated down. The atmosphere had shivered into stillness and there were tears in Roop's eyes. The tears trickled down her cheeks and fell on the carpet, and the red rectangle seemed to burst into flame.

"Did you love Joe Brown?" I asked her.

"The young man I was in love with got phthisis in London. He was on the same ship with me. He died on the way, beyond Aden, in the Red Sea."

"The Red Sea," I mused. The red rectangle of the carpet was the Red Sea. In the depth of its waters I saw a pale withered face coughing its life away, and getting lost in the eddies of churning water. The lover of Roop, he is now lost in dreams, dreaming in the depths of the Red Sea and Roop's tears are falling on my carpet.

"Huh," the poet said, and I banged his head with a book.

Roop smiled through her tears. Sometimes, it is more tragic to hold back tears than to shed them.

Roop . . .

What a strange girl she was. The poet Joseph Brown loved her while in London and here in Lucknow, a poor vagabond artist had got caught in her love. He knew it was poison, yet he took it. Dejection, disappointment, helplessness. Why does not love always requite love? What is this fire which scorches the heart of one and becomes cold as a slab of ice in the heart of another? Love, which makes the lover shed tears and does not bring even a fleeting shadow of a smile to the lips of the loved one?

I patted the carpet and paused for an answer.

The carpet said: "I am the cross. I know what is pain. But I don't know its remedy."

And Roop said, "It's fate. Fate took you to the shop to buy the carpet. Fate brought us together. It's your fate that I cannot fall in love with you. In spite of a thousand efforts our friendship cannot develop into love. What else is it if not fate?"

Then she said to the poet, "Won't you read me some of your verses?"

After a few days she told me that she was in love with the poet.

"With that nincompoop? It's a lie."

"Have you seen his eyes?" She sighed. "How sad they are. Like Christ's on the cross."

I said, "I'll blind my eyes, if you tell me to."

Perhaps my bitterness annoyed her. She became grave. "What can I do? I'm helpless."

"Yes, no one can predict the ways of the heart," I said with a touch of sarcasm.

The day they left I gave them a small farewell party at my house. Roop was in a black Dacca sari. The kajal in her eyes was deep and her bangles were black. Every day when I saw her I was reminded of the sun, the moon, and moonlight. But I don't know why today everything reminded me of darkness. Why did she look a picture of sadness in the supreme moment of her victory? Was it the gloom of a poor artist's heart that was reflected in her face?

I asked her to sing the same song which she sang the first day . . . . I still remember after the song she also danced for us. I did not look at her face. I kept looking at her feet—dim, hazy feet on which the red streak of henna flashed like lightning, the only flash of brightness in the dim room. I kept watching the dance of that streak of red, and when the dance was over I lifted those feet and enshrined them in my heart. Those feet are still safely ensconced there. Is there no place in this vault except for mummies?

When she left I sat down on the carpet. A pale rose petal from her coiffure had fallen on the carpet. I have forgotten all about Roopvati except the pair of feet and the fallen rose petal. What a picture they would make! Why had I never painted such a picture

before?

I asked the carpet.

The carpet replied: "I am the cross. The cross bestows death. It knows nothing about life, and has no idea about its order, balance, and sequence . . ."

Well, let me forget it all. What has happened is beyond recall. But if in my living moments I have to taste the pleasures of the grave, why should I not set about acquiring them with calm equanimity of mind? If I have to taste poison in honey why should I not taste undiluted poison? Let me snuff out this dim spark of conscience that flickers in my heart. In the galloping darkness let me look at the spreading sin. Let us mock life and laugh. If it cannot be love. Let it be lust.

So the artist cultivated the friendship of another girl—a WACI. Her name was Asha—Hope—but her face betokened disappointment. She was hungry for men, as if she had never seen a man all her life. She followed me everywhere like a street animal—poor thing! The artist had perhaps started pitying her. With a kind of paternal regard he took her along with him everywhere. He could feel the sarcasm when friends commended his choice. But he accepted their compliments with exaggerated politeness. If someone said, "How ugly she is! What made you . . .," he would fly at them in rage and dilate on her charms for hours. He had made a sketch of her in charcoal and showed it to all who visited his studio. Perhaps he was showing them his lacerated heart. Look here. Look. Look at this sketch . . . What do I care for you? I am the master of my soul . . . charcoal!

But he who had never gone beyond Hazratganj all his life now decided to flee from the city. Walking on the pavement he suffered from distorted hallucinations. On every cobblestone he saw the trembling shadow of someone's dim feet. In every sip of coffee he felt someone's warm breath. In the mad glare of electric lights he saw thousands of kum-kum floating away. Did someone laugh? He jerked his head to discover from where the laughter came. Oh, it was the same Kashmiri mynah singing in the cage. But the bul-bul, breaking the bars of the cage, had flown away, and he was still confined to the wilderness of Hazratganj. Why? The red streak of

henna flashed like lightning and asked him this question repeatedly.

Now that he was leaving the city he invited his friends—also the WACI and her friends—to a feast. When the guests had left he found the girl still sitting on the carpet. She rested her head against his breast and started crying. And her warm tears fell and froze into her heart like flowers of snow; why does love not requite love? What is this fire which burns one person and becomes a slab of ice in the heart of another?

I asked the carpet: "What is this game? Whom am I mocking? Whose wounds are these? Why does this girl cry? If it is all fate then why is there this eternal struggle to bring a mummy back to life?"

The carpet replied: "I know nothing. I am the cross—the cross which hammers the nail through the heart. I bring no light. I show the end of life, but not its beginning or glory."

In the new city.

Four men are playing cards on the carpet.

Two actors.

Two traders.

And the man who watches the game is the artist.

The actors and the traders start quarrelling. In one of the moves, the trader, deliberately or by mistake, has raked in eight annas in excess of his due. They come to blows. The carpet gets mauled. My shirt gets torn into shreds; the man who tries to intervene always gets the worst hammering.

They all sit down to drink. The eyes of the artist are blood-shot. The gay and handsome actor is talking to the non-communicative handsome actor: "Love? Love? What do you know of love, you sala? You, still smelling of college! Ask me about the intoxication of love . . . Damn, this wine is no good! . . . Have you seen Rani?"

"The best actress of 1944?" I said.

"Yes. Sala, what do you know about her? She is my girl. . . . Understand? For her sake I tolerated the taunts of my parents, fought with my rivals, left home . . . . Do you see this ring—these cuff-links? They are gold . . . What do you know of gold, you sala? She gave me these . . . as presents. But I won't marry her.



No, never!" He said decisively.

"Why?"

"She loves me. But she is richer than me. She wants to marry me. But I'll die rather than marry her."

"Don't you love her?" one of the traders asked.

"Why do you spurn money when it knocks at your door?" the other trader added.

The actor clenched his fists. "I want to remain what I am," he said. "I love her, of course. But I won't be a slave to her. I want her love but not her riches. Ugh!"

He brought down his fist on the carpet and burst into a loud laugh.

The carpet trembled and assumed a strange colour.

"Give me more wine, you bastard!" His shaky hands groped for the glass.

"Rani?" I said. "I've read in today's paper that she has married an American."

The actor slowly drained the glass on the carpet. He gripped the glass tightly and it shattered into pieces in his fingers.

"It's a lie, a damnable lie!" he said hoarsely. The artist picked up the paper and read him the news.

Propping himself on his elbows he watched me intently. His complexion had changed colour. His face was fading and the features of a mummy gradually emerged.

"It's a lie!" he shouted again and abruptly became quiet. The second actor gave him another glass of wine. He clung to the carpet and wept. Then he retched. I thought the colour of the carpet was fading—from red to white and then pale, as if it was not a carpet but a shroud.

The following day I had the carpet cleaned and was going to have it placed in the room when my sweetheart came. This was my latest girl of the new city. The artist had found a new love. How difficult it is to love. But when the first love is dead it becomes easier to love again and again.

The lips of my sweetheart were thick, her cheeks were plump. Her body was fat, her laughter thick, her wit dim. She was not a woman but a two or three-layered carpet. To-day she had pleated

her hair into two pigtails and stuck jasmines in them.

She sat down on the carpet. I embraced her and said, "To-day you have outshone Cleopatra."

"What's Cleopatra?" she asked.

"A queen of Egypt."

"Egypt?"

"Don't you know Egypt, the country where dead bodies were embalmed as mummies. May God grant you Cleopatra's death."

"Oh, how you talk. What happened to her?"

"She was bitten by an asp."

She gave a faint cry and moved closer to me. "Are you trying to frighten me?" she said, holding my arm, and laughed a thick coarse laugh as if a buffalo were chewing cud. Then she offered me her lips, like a generous peasant offering sugar cane to a city dweller.

I said, "This carpet is born once but dies a thousand deaths."

"Why do you talk of death again and again?" she bleated.

"You won't understand," I said. "What's this delicate smell oozing from your lips and cheeks and eyes and hair?"

"Nothing," she smiled coyly, "you see, today I used scented copra oil."

I stole a glance at the carpet. Its colour seemed to be evaporating. The poor thing was again on the verge of death. I could not stand its agony. I fled from the room.

I made for the railway station, to drink my fill of beer, to flush my kidneys, to cleanse my soul, and wash away the impurities that had accumulated in my body, so that I could again feel fresh and light.

But before I could find beer I chanced across Roop.

"You here?" I said.

"I was away to Junagarh, to the hills."

"And the poet?"

"He has left me." She coughed.

"Why?"

"I have phthisis. I was in a sanatorium there."

In her eyes I saw the green sea where a wan and emaciated face was caught in a whirlpool. The face melted and in its place I saw

the stale and dehydrated face of the poet tossing on the waves.

"Where's that swine now?" I asked her.

"Please don't," she said in an injured tone. "Don't call him names. I still love him."

"But . . ."

"In spite of his deserting me. I am going home—to my parents. I want to die in peace."

"No," I said firmly. "I won't let you go like this. Life snatched you away from me. But we shall knock at death's door together. And if there's a world hereafter we . . ."

She smiled, the same bright smile, the same sandalwood face, the same dazzling kum-kum.

I caught her arm. "Let's go home, Roop. We could not be together while you were full of life. Grant me a few moments of your death."

She smiled. "Perhaps you don't know. Love treats people the same in life or death."

The engine whistled.

"I had no hope I'd ever see you again," she said. "I'm sorry but I must go now. Take this book. It's Rilke's."

The guard waved the flag.

She proceeded toward her compartment. I could not look at her face. My eyes were riveted to her feet. The feet walked on and on, away from me and yet they came closer, close to my heart. I lifted them and hid them in my breast.

I raised my head.

The train had disappeared.

My girl was still waiting for me.

"Where did you go?" she said.

Silence.

"What's this book?"

"One of Rilke's."

"What?"

"A book of poems."

"Read me some."

I opened the book at random and started reading: "God, you gave me life according to your own wishes. Now give me death

according to my own. I want nothing more from you, O God."

"You have again started talking of death," she said. "It's ominous."

She snatched away the book and put it aside and offered her lips to me. The carpet was now boiling, a river of flames, a sea of pus, a turbulent fountain of poison.

I asked it: "You are the cross. You made one the Saviour. Tell me, what will you make me?"

The carpet replied: "The same that you have already become, a vault, a hollow vault in whose breast mummies are embalmed."

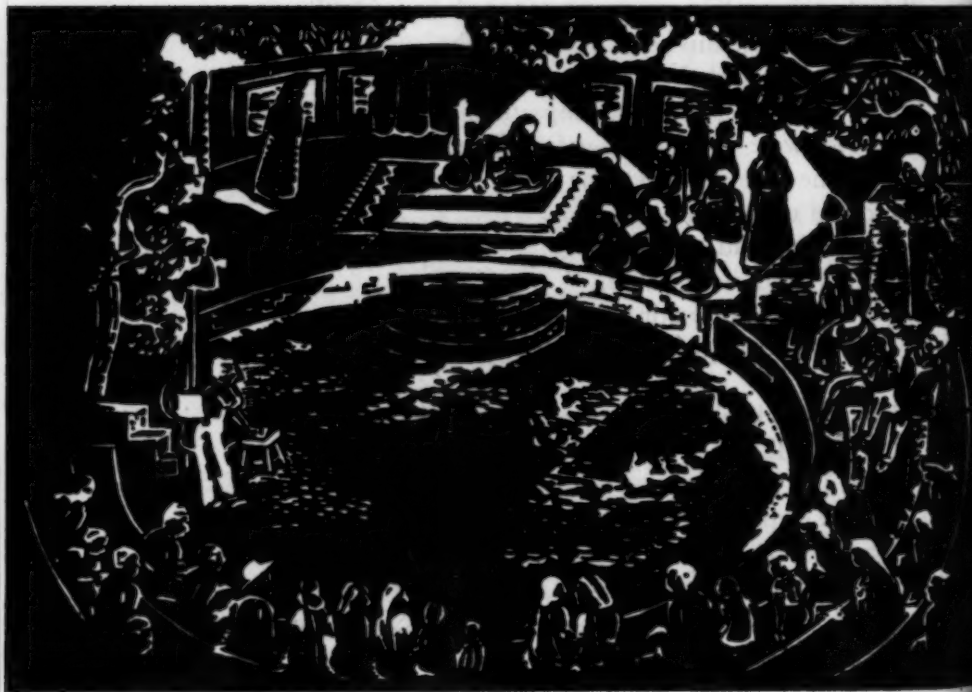
I said to my girl, "I feel like burning this carpet to ashes."

"Yes, it is old," she said.

"But this is the only carpet I have," I said sadly. "And only this one life. I can change neither the carpet nor my life."

And the artist kissed her, sucking the sugar cane off her lips.

OPEN AIR THEATRE, woodcut by Jagdish Mittal



Opposite page

JAT DANCERS, woodcut by Jagdish Mittal





HUNGRY CHILD, woodcut by Chittaprosad



1945

SUDHINDRANATH DATTA

Translated from the Bengali by the author

I

Predicting victory, you said that, diabolic though  
The Nazis were, they too must vanish once their day was done;  
And, true enough, defeated Germany is in the throe  
Of total death, while West, it seems, awaits the morning sun.  
At least the Russian legions, like a retributive flood,  
Engulf exploited lands to aggravate their brittleness;  
And Paris, freed, when not redeeming shame with traitors' blood,  
Parades before the tattered world dress after perfect dress.  
Become at last an equal partner both in war and peace,  
America is lavish now with money as with men;  
And even England, which monopolized the Golden Fleece,  
Prepares to found the welfare state and start from scratch again.

II

Of course, the Chinese leaders, selfish as they mostly are,  
Persist in letting democratic forces always down;  
And keeping faith with India would have been simpler far,  
Had not the creed of Gandhi made the camp of Jinnah frown,  
Besides, as Belgium begins to find, resisters all,  
The rulers of today are prey to their opponents' ghosts;  
And counter-revolutionaries rally to the call  
For Italy's deliverance by anti-Fascist hosts.  
But Churchill's fulminations have induced the timely purge  
Of Trotsky's heirs in Greece who deviated to the Left;  
And just as Argentina learns that progress is no scourge,  
So Turkey draws her sword to prove that she is also deft.

III

Must prophets then equivocate because the moral law  
Reflects antinomies inherent in the universe;  
And if, indeed, the good were altogether free from flaw,  
How could the bad avoid becoming infinitely worse?

It is from death, perhaps, that life derives significance;  
 And vice is virtue's mirror-image, wrong inverted right.  
 No myth is born until the brave succumb to cravens' plans;  
 And liberty requires the dungeon for its finest flight.  
 Secreted by the past, invisibly the future grows,  
 And justice can be rendered only when injustice asks.  
 To save the world for friends we have to liquidate our foes;  
 And man's salvation lies in sweating at appointed tasks.

## IV

And yet is earthly life, though brief, so very incomplete  
 That death alone can make our inspiration plenary?  
 And if that be the case, was your existence meant to cheat  
 When, disciplined, it turned increasingly exemplary?  
 And, now beyond the broken arc, have you no further need  
 For charity, non-violence and conscientious doubt?  
 Is boycotting oppression vain? Does intellect mislead  
 In positing the good as absolute? And, left without  
 Delusions of humanity, have you withdrawn your writ  
 Forbidding saints from using fraud against the fraudulent?  
 And since the Rhine has quenched the blaze that Barcelona lit,  
 Should not the ban on strikes in Spain cause any discontent?

## V

Then let the calculating Czechs exult while bombs descend  
 In overwhelming bursts upon defenceless Budapest.  
 A causal series, air raids reproduce themselves on end;  
 And Dresden follows Warsaw, one the other's palimpsest.  
 The London caucus may conspire against the Lublin rump;  
 Who wants may claim at San Francisco Poland as his own,  
 Dishonest promises may buy exemption from the slump;  
 The fields we reap shall give us back whatever we have sown.  
 As Arjuna the ambidexter found, we are but tools  
 Denied the luxury of pity for the consequence;  
 And, blind like flies entangled in the spider's net, we fools  
 Expect that individuals can hamper Providence.

## VI

For all that, when you spoke of victory, you did not want  
The present state of things which cancels profit out by loss,  
Reducing them to utter nullity; and what we flaunt  
As peace is but exhaustion of the will, our special cross.  
Was it for this that we endured two global wars, rejoiced  
In countless insurrections, piled up millions of dead  
To rot in shallow graves? And has the time now come to hoist  
Triumphal flags along the cheering streets dictators tread?  
The heavens are extinct; and darkness has regained its sway.  
You too are lost forever in the emptiness of space.  
Who then will answer if the desolation of today  
Is cumulative punishment for Adam's fall from grace?

## Alone

HUMAYUN KABIR

Translated from the Bengali by the author

I live alone in my own world of dreams.  
Alone I spend the year-long days and nights.  
It is my sun that shines in my sky,  
It is my clouds that gather on its blue depths.  
Damp green darkness slowly deepens on my world  
When shy evening dons the bride's red flaming robes.

Many are the rivers and the countries in my world.  
Many the roads through many hills and glades.  
Somewhere like frozen foam on the crest of waves  
Snowpeaks rise into the infinite sky.  
Somewhere the earth's affection showers golden harvests,  
And fountains rush forth in abundant joy.

Once I thought to build a cottage beneath a shady tree,  
To let life flow in gentle hope and fear.  
The southern wind would come and play around my home,  
Flowers blossom in my garden through livelong spring,  
Shy *sephalis* droop to earth on autumnal nights,  
And new dreams of love dawn upon my eager eyes.

And withall I stay in the prison of my self:  
My heart is weary of my own company.  
All around I hear soft words and songs,  
I sense the smile of joy and the call of love,  
I feel the swell of sorrow in bleeding hearts,  
I yearn to find a way to join my fellow men.

On the lonely shores of my forsaken heart  
The waves from the outer world come and vainly beat.  
Why are the foam-flecked waters so restless, wild?  
What message is it they bring from across the seas?  
I cannot understand what they want to say,  
How shall I transcend my own experience and comprehend?

I look at my fellow men with wondering eyes.  
They are so near and yet so full of mystery.  
The secret sorrows in your heart  
I can never experience in my life,  
I can never see the dawn and twilight which are yours:  
Alone, we each go our way along our lonely road.

I live alone in my own island world.  
All around the salt seas swell and roar,  
Day and night from my own promontory  
I watch the evening lamps across the waters.  
I yearn to sing the songs I have made for you,  
A fellow-human, I long to bring you love and friendship.

## The Soul of Birds

PREMENDRA MITRA

Translated from the Bengali by Lila Ray and others

Roaming the lonely wilds  
I may chance upon the soul of birds.

No longer the mere pastures.  
Neither the grains  
Nor the bare burden only.  
Now, the shining sweep,  
The rebellious flout  
That defies the world's puny pull.

In the fields and fen  
They still peck at their feed  
And evade nothing  
Yet their heart-blood is warm  
With the bluest of sky-blue oaths.

All the qualms and clamours  
In the turns and twists of life  
Lodged deep in the heart  
Like bullets from the hunter's gun  
Dissolve and disappear  
In that holy heat.  
Only the brave sharp swift wings  
Set no limits to the horizon

If ever this heart be utter alone  
I may attain the soul of birds  
Aware of another sun.

## Send Water to My Roots

BISHNU DEY

Translated from the Bengali by the author\*

Their beginning was in spring—  
 In one sense, of course, late winter,  
 Or earlier still,  
 Last year or the year before;  
 Year by year, in the long process of Nature's work or law,  
 Within the restraint of a handful of earth,  
 Bound by the freedom of the wind with a soft wet resolution,  
 Their prelude of fragrance rings  
 On the petals, with the pizzicato of pollens;  
 From last year in the dripping procession of the rains,  
 Or earlier still, in the five-year-long far adventure,  
 Out of life's affirmation comes the abundance of today;  
 And so today  
 When lonely melancholy falls over the sky  
 And the warrant of darkness on the red *simul*,<sup>1</sup>  
 The gold of the *gulmohar*<sup>2</sup> also pales,  
 And the starlings hush their chorus in the rose-apple garden,  
 And the crows of Calcutta and the flight of seagulls are far,  
 Then, in the buds, throb some intangible passion  
 And in the patient hearts aches the fugue of April,  
 In spasms of tremendous pain, in one certain resolution,  
 Eyes ever open in ecstasy, eager in transformation, in creation.  
 Then, I turn on the light  
 In the shelter of a book or a friend,  
 Or listen, tired, to the news of rioting somewhere;  
 Then, coming out on the open plains of the evening, I see, in the  
 unselfish sky,

<sup>1</sup> Silk cotton tree with gorgeous red flowers.      <sup>2</sup> Goldflower.

\* The original Bengali poem was written in 1947, during the awful days of the Partition of Bengal. Translated when the original was recorded for the Harvard Poetry Library.—  
 Author's note.



Blossoming pure and tranquil  
Wiping away in an instant the accumulated mistakes of time,  
Like a modest lotus, restrained yet certain,  
Still, in the consciousness of labor,  
An unerring complete being  
As if free among night's constellations in the sky of a sensible  
existence,  
A bunch of white *bet*<sup>3</sup> blossoms.

---

In the heat the ancient brilliance of the *gulmohar* fades,  
The *Krishnachura*<sup>4</sup> sears the eyes,  
A haze of sunlight burns in the withered, fallen laburnums,  
Look, here and there, the people who have lost a country, panting  
in the shade,  
Beside the park, on the pavements, the roads, beneath the porticos,  
They think, what do they think: Fleeing their home they search  
for it,  
Some here, some there, some in Barisal,<sup>5</sup> some in Dacca<sup>6</sup>;  
In the hot wind the blue and pure *phurus*<sup>8</sup> falls,  
The *Krishnachura* drags on and on the exchange-of-garlands,  
Seeking the cool shade of Jamuna in the fierce heat;  
Look, here and there, how many homeless, panting in the shade,  
In parks, under sheds, on the streets, on mansion-verandahs, on the  
pavements,  
What do they think, having fled their homes in search of a country,  
Perhaps they think where to go, to Howrah,<sup>7</sup> or is it Dacca?  
We, in our homes, we are also a various crowd,  
We sing our part-songs quietly,

<sup>3</sup> Small, fragrant, jasmine-like summer flower.      <sup>4</sup> *Poinciana Regia*.

<sup>5</sup> Districts and district-towns in eastern Bengal (now Pakistan).

<sup>6</sup> Cassia-like flower.      <sup>7</sup> Great railway center near Calcutta.

Or do not sing at all; but shake our heads, heads burnt by the threats  
 and the cajolings,  
 Now and then, some of us gasp in despair  
 In this death-in-life or life-in-death, broken, futile;  
 What do they think, in this workless meaningless strange mother-  
 land,  
 Where to go, they think, where is a land cool with rain?  
 For they have seen the journey through the deserts of Gobi, the  
 smiling men,  
 The travellers, the explorers they have seen in the Arctic lands,  
 garlanded with triumph  
 And with hearts fulfilled with the goodwill of science,  
 Heroic with the love of man, on the burnt land of snow or cracked  
 Central Asia,  
 Bringing the autumn of life with fields of wheat, of rice on steppe  
 and tundra,  
 Bringing the victorious settlements, the prosperous societies, making  
 the lands sing.  
 How many Cheliyushkins, look, passing to Howrah, Chittagong,<sup>8</sup>  
 Bankura<sup>9</sup> or Dacca!

---

Perhaps there is no help for it,  
 Perhaps the suffering of separateness is history at present,  
 The crossing and recrossing with dry feet on a dead river's sandy bed;  
 Yet the summer wind blows up Bengal's Bay,  
 And fruit is in the mango-blossom;  
 With drifts of *bel* and *mallika*,<sup>9</sup>  
 The garden is rapturous today, time's garden,  
 Yet the desperate agony of living and dying,  
 Of dread and greedy winters,  
 Of rage and regret, leaves falling and the shedding of leaves  
 Continues at the root of our days, in the foliage of our nights.  
 If I had been O! a flower, or the south wind blowing,  
 If I had been steady, the moon, swift and unchanging in transfor-  
 mation!

<sup>8</sup> West Bengal.

<sup>9</sup> Small, fragrant, jasmine-like summer flower.

But we are of the earth, we men,  
We fashion our future from the flowing of our past,  
Between this shore and that, of our present,  
Despite some residue—in rain or artesian water.

In the pain of fruitful labor, or I might say, in keen expectancy  
Standing close together on the eddying bridge of tension  
We have our inheritance, in our daily footstep  
Of the actor and the act done;  
We dig, spin, weave, and husk  
Each and all, and if we, each or all of us, trample the grain  
Some more, some less,  
The good and the evil of it is for each and for all, some less, some  
more.

It is our history, counting minute by minute,  
The wave of its lifetime crested over living and dying,  
In our livelihood, in our way of life, in the patterning of the mind  
and the body,  
In proper and improper work, in no work, despite some residue  
As a bowl of water freezes and the ice cracks the bowl.

---

Now the wind rises, the smokeless moon, O the swing  
In the evening, the spring evening, in the wind the moon rises in the  
ring swinging

Or does it not swing at all?

Oh, it is the full moon smiling forth; or does it sneer?

Is nature stupidly mad,

Will only the hunters be gay?

What wintry sadness has the still dumb evening brought

In the beauty of the full moon, in this spring?

Yet, the spring evening comes bearing the murmur of the swinging  
sea

On a charred day, in this death's city,

Still, the full moon comes, real on road and roof,

Drowning the vile shadows of the day,

Shattering the blind discord,

And the trade of the crazy,

Grinding to dust the rapacious demonic tirade.

Perhaps I have missed your laughter, Moon!  
But I have not at least sought despair  
In the flood of this calm blue light from a golden face,  
Rather, have I counted the fortunate, the prosperous, the shapely in  
    many lands,  
Village after village, in cities, in the rain of a far-flung peace  
I have seen as if we are all floating,  
As if rocking on the waves of the shining sea or river  
Or fountain stream of light,  
Under the equitable stretches of the sky where death also is full with  
    age, rich in sons and daughters,  
Mature, human, where only to live  
And make live is natural.

---

Perhaps now the suffering is all,  
We have to watch and experience and learn today,  
To go on writing, in letters of our being,  
This crazy present, erring in injustice and oppression,  
Listen to the music of one's own and all others' actions,  
Like Bhishma on the field of Kurukshetra, or in that Virat palace  
The underground hero Arjuna in the guise of Brihannala,  
Or as in the preparations for March and April,  
In the hidden festival of the leaf-fall and the new stems and tendrils  
There is the inevitable pause  
In the intangible but acute hymn of life,  
Like the metric of verse  
In the throb of the breath-tones;  
Or, as when with the foot raised to step down,  
One sees in front in the crack of the bridgeplank  
The repulse and the call of the abyss;  
Or perhaps as the song of the confluence  
On an unrippling conserving noon on the Hugly  
Behind it many memories and many streams,  
Of the Rupnarayan,  
Of the Damodar, Kansai, Haldi and Rasulpur  
And the distant Matla, Mathabhanga  
And further still, the Padma's flood,

Yet it seems stationary, solitary, with nothing to do,  
Without neighbors,  
Or if there are, still alone, because, ever,  
Somebody else's duty is dangerous for you, like the flood in the  
dry sea,

The movement of the sea ending only in tidal terror;  
Therefore, hushed in expectancy but ready for the leap,  
Like Bala Saraswati or Rukmini Devi  
In the dark dance hall of the focussed stage,  
At the moment before the rhythm is chanted;  
Or, like an indwelling expectant mother,  
Deeply watchful with the grave silence before a summer storm  
Or like a Tartar holding the reins, intent, collected  
On the Pamirs, on the Aral or beside the Black or Caspian Seas—  
And then the swaying begins, the swinging,  
The arrowsharp flowing,  
Many-sounding with the surf!  
Sea after sea, rising in the rhythm,  
Seas and rivers, in the laughter and the sobbing of the great blue  
ocean,  
In the world-wide vision of that presiding beauty rising from the sea,  
The full tide surges.

In that all-in-one instant at that peak moment  
The songs of the past and the future grow ever-present  
In the daily, in the day-to-day routine,  
In the fertile silt on all sides, mind and body,  
Life in living.

---

Endless is your flowing, it seems, in ebb and flood,  
In this land and that, the unceasing surge of the waves  
Breaking and building banks and shores in processions and long  
marches,  
In the desperate battle of the flood, sometimes in an underground  
stream or in a still small pond  
Sometimes in the self-contained grace of the quiet secluded garden  
You spray out the glow of movement

Sometimes at a distance, sometimes nearby, at the sails or at the helm  
I go, a companion of your current, lest you forget,  
I go, always,  
If ever you in pale fatigue  
Halt, with the inland and idle cascade  
I receive you, spreading leafy shade over your heart,  
In you I live, beloved,  
By the trees beside your own ghats,  
I bring to blossom flowers that are yours in your ghats, your gardens,  
your own.  
Send water to my roots.

## Grass

JIBANANANDA DAS

Translated from the Bengali by Buddhadeva Bose

The world this morning is filled with soft green grass, gentle like  
green lemon-leaves,  
Like an unripe orange it is—this green grass—as fragrant—with the  
deer ripping it off with teeth.  
How I wish I too could drink the fragrance of this grass, like some  
greenish wine, beaker after beaker,  
Could squeeze the flesh of this grass, rub my eyes against its eyes and  
my feathers against its plumage,  
Could descend from the savoury darkness of some warm grass-  
mother's flesh and be born as grass within the grass.



## Not We the Doers

AGYEYA

Translated from the Hindi by the author

Not we the doers, the builders, the successful ones,  
The men of accumulated merit.  
Not even perhaps the pupils, the disciples, the followers.  
The luxury of choice of what to be  
Was never ours—to exercise, or even to hope for—  
We who stinted, struggled, smouldered endlessly just  
To be.  
No adjectives, no epithets, no sobriquets, no epaulettes of distinction,  
Not even a name,  
For there is nothing we have done  
Except to be.

Or only, perhaps,  
Uncovered a new raw layer of the pain of being human,  
Cut a new hole in this suffocating cell-wall of suffering:  
Only, when the light broke through,  
Before it scattered looked at it with unflinching eyes,  
Recognized it with unfaltering mind,  
Given it its name.

Not reckoning if the steady gaze would blind the eyes,  
Not reckoning if the weight of meaning would burst the net of  
language,  
Not reckoning if in carving the name indelibly the cup of sensibility  
would break.

We saw:  
We recognized:  
We gave it a name.

Not the doers, the builders, the successful ones,  
The men of accumulated merit.  
Not we the choosers what to be—

We who stinted, struggled, smouldered just to be.  
Not that the truth we do not know.  
Not that the words are only rarely, fortuitously found.  
Both are frequent visitors: the problem  
Is different:

How, when, while both are unaware, to breach  
The wall that they maintain between them—  
Or blow it up  
With high explosive.

Poets there are, no doubt: to them their privileged actions.  
Our concern is only for the moment and the means  
By which in a shower of light to reconcile  
These two, estranged and tense, intransigent,  
But both  
Our eternal friends.

## I, Songbird

SUMITRANANDAN PANT

Translated from the Hindi by the author

I am the harbinger of new humanity:  
I sing of the dignity of a liberated land; \*  
I carry the flaming torch of the silent eternity beyond the horizons of  
the mind.

I cast a golden shadow on the shambles of today  
And wake to music in tomorrow's dawn.  
On the barren branches of the mass-mind, in life's autumn twilight,  
I sprout the new spring's flame-shoots.

The storm-whipped tension of the human sea I transform  
Into a heaving aspiration for new visions:  
The winter-weary Earth-mind groaning in the wilderness I, spring's  
song-bird, fire with spirit.

I teach the clay feet of world-weary men  
To step to the rhythm of dreams.  
I uncover boundless Nature's radiant bosom to eyes darkened with  
the bitterness of hate.

The intelligence lost in distinctions of Life and Mind  
I rouse into the undivided Oneness of the Soul;  
The right-numbered, outward scattered Consciousness I helped to  
higher planes of inward being.

The hapless herds deceived by the mirage of ideals  
I lead to an inward Milky Way:  
I rouse the individual human in the all-Man and with my clarion  
send him into life's struggle.

I, song-bird, rise from my earthy nest  
To spread my mind-wings in the sky of Consciousness:  
With my song I pour out inner light bathing life's darkness in gold.

I snare the angels with my thought  
And make them of man's life a part:  
I, lover of humanity, build earth-heavens on which I lavish the wealth  
of gods.

I lead Man beyond gates of living and dying, out into the open,  
And set him up in his eternal station.  
I am the messenger of divine consciousness, of new awakening in a  
liberated land.

## Rhapsody at Noon

B. S. MARDHEKAR

Translated from the Marathi by the author

Do not drive me away, forsooth I only linger  
where others come and go intent upon their several tasks;  
the sky they carry in their heart is foreign to me;  
their day is not my day;  
their night is not my night; where they  
pulse to pregnant prophecy, I am stultified by my own cult  
of crescent omen and the ultimates of wanton moodlessness.

Do not drive me away; for I do not stand at the cross-roads,  
as men who strive and stretch their being to the limits  
of purposiveness do; they see and know  
the onward march, the wise retreat,  
the path on the right,  
the road on the left,  
the four-directional law of divine will sanctified into  
an aspiration of earth's abundant grace. But  
I face no four-square deal; I only linger where  
many roads meet and many lanes twine their tracks  
round many strange streets.

Do not drive me away; forsooth I only linger:  
I guess no hurt, I press no perilous point; only  
my feet are made for lingering,  
for fingering thorn and stone and stubble; not  
for walking  
nor for stalking staff or hare or petal; in my heart I carry no sky,  
but caverns of emptiness,  
giant sand-dunes of peripheral sadness,  
and the unspeakable terror of storms asleep  
in the deserts of mind.

Do not drive me away; I only linger  
hoping for the small sanity of indistinguishable spirit,  
wounded by no fiercer sorrow than its own little transitoriness  
and blind God's buff; coursing no path  
and forcing no place.

## The Caves

K. M. PANNIKAR

Translated from the Malayalam by the author

The bold leonine roar  
that from these caves resounded  
once made the proud and the mighty  
who sat mercilessly on the shoulders of the poor  
quake and tremble.

The bombs which they hurled in fury  
became in the sight of these cave dwellers  
but pleasant fire works.

The soil is rocky and hard:  
Even good water is difficult to get.  
The place has little to recommend it.  
What then the source  
of your power which  
shook the world and overturned empires?  
What magic armour, what divine weapon  
did you secure in these caves  
to conquer and humble your enemies?

O poet, your question is fair and I shall answer it fully.  
Yes, indeed, I have a magic armour  
and countless weapons of invincible power.  
And more, a beatitude that comes from the realization of truth.  
For I attained illumination here in these caves

by keeping my feet firmly planted on this soil  
and meditating on the true doctrine  
and undergoing fiery penances.  
I saw the noble face of truth.  
That doctrine I shall proclaim to you.  
That discipline I shall explain  
for the good of the world.

"There is but one source of power in this world  
and that lies in those who work—  
The farmer bent with his toil  
tilling the earth  
sowing and reaping;  
The artisan at his home  
making tools;  
The laborer in towns  
working in overcrowded factories:  
These create and by their creation  
feed the world  
and give it strength, grace and beauty.  
In them alone is power.

"Those others  
who oblivious of this truth  
rob the producer of the wealth he creates  
and think they rule the world,  
are in reality powerless.  
They live in a false dream,  
in an illusory world.  
This my doctrine.  
By its light I have seen a way  
during my stay in these caves."

"Oh Great soul," I said,  
"Let these caves,  
purified by your penances,  
proclaim this message  
to the world."



## To the Reader

DHARMAVIR BHARATI

Translated from the Hindi by the author

Search not for me in these poems, these fictions,  
These alleys that I have passed through.  
This cast-off slough.

I am not important, nor is art.  
There is a third, greater truth  
For the realization of which  
My soul has burned long and slowly over the flames  
Of life's sacrificial fire.

It may be that you, unidentified friend,  
May reach before me the object of my quest,  
For you too, knowing or unknowing, head that way.

When through long alleys of pain and suffering and conflict you  
reach the portals

Of that same Truth, and in its benign shadow  
Are anointed,

Then (if you remember)

Look for me amongst the flowers of worship scattered at your feet: I  
may be there.

Search not for me in these poems, these fictions.



DOLL (Bengali), woodcut by Chittaprosad

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## Editorial Notes

(continued from inside front cover)  
stressed, in this connection, that these "foreign numbers" are in no way government-sponsored, either by our own or other governments. The Editors, as always, assume final responsibility for all the issues of *The Literary Review*.

Kaatje Hurlbut's story "The Vestibule," which first appeared in *The Literary Review* (Spring 1960), has been chosen for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 1961* (Houghton Mifflin Company), edited by Martha Foley and David Burnett.

Alfred Herzing, a member of the editorial board of *The Literary Review*, is editing a number of the *Review* that will feature poets under forty years of age. We hope to publish this number in the fall of 1962. Long as well as short poems will be considered. Manuscripts should be submitted directly to:

Mr. Albert Herzing  
*The Literary Review*  
Fairleigh Dickinson University  
Teaneck, New Jersey

Unaccepted manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Incidentally, Mr. Herzing's first book of poems, *The Mother of the Amazons*, appears this fall (Scribner's: Poets of Today series).

The Bacchylides translations by Robert Fagles in *The Literary Review* (Spring 1961) are included in the complete Fagles' Bacchylides, to be published this fall by the Yale and Oxford presses. The notes are by Adam Parry and the foreword by Sir Maurice Bowra.

The scene, "Gods and Niblicks," by Peter Viereck, which first appeared in *The Literary Review* (Autumn 1960), was included in his play, *The Tree Witch*, published recently by Scribner's.

Thirty of the poems in Rae Dalven's *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, published this spring (Harcourt Brace and World), with an introduction by W. H. Auden, first appeared in *The Literary Review* (Spring 1959). Miss Dalven is a former member of the English faculty at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

In January-February of this year the Thirtieth Anniversary number of the literary magazine *Sur* appeared in Argentina. For three uninterrupted decades it has made foreign writers known in Argentina through Spanish translations and has encouraged many talented young Argentine authors in their literary endeavors. *Sur* has survived economic stress and political controversy because of the faith and character of its founder, Victoria Ocampo, the friend of some of the most famous writers of our century, such as Rabindranath Tagore, the centenary of whose birth we celebrate this year, and Saint-John Perse, last year's winner of the Nobel prize for poetry. The Thirtieth Anniversary number of *Sur* includes contributions by writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Eduardo Mallea, and Alberto Girri, all of whom have grown up with *Sur*. In the Preface Victoria Ocampo tells the story of the struggles and the achievements of the magazine. *The Literary Review*, four years old, salutes *Sur*, thirty years old, for its services to *belles lettres* in Argentina and, through those services, to literature throughout the world.

**India Number**

**Premendra Mitra**

**B. S. Mardhekar**

**Kartar Singh Duggal**

**Maqbul F. Husain**

**V. S. Gaitonde**

**The**

**Literary**

**Review**

**Jagdish Mittal**

**A. Mohi-ud-din**

**Sumitranandan Pant**

**K. M. Pannikar**

**Khushwant Singh**

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